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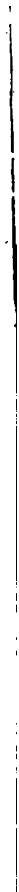
THE DOUBLING
OF JOSEPH
BRERETON

WM R. HODDER



Jessie L. Chapman.

15th April 1903.



**THE
DOUBLING OF JOSEPH BRERETON**



“‘I suppose Frank Somers hadn't a mark like this?’”
(Page 8.)

The Doubling or Joseph Brereton

[Frontispiece

THE DOUBLING
OF
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BY
WILLIAM REGINALD HODDER

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THE DOUBLING

OF

JOSEPH BRERETON

CHAPTER I

“**W**HAT! Frank Somers! Well, that licks everything out o’ sight, every time. Who’d ‘a’ thought o’ seein’ you here? Why, the last time I—— What— what — what — eh? Not Frank Somers? Waal, now come; you know the game you’re playin’ at, but ef you ain’t Frank Somers, I guess yew’ll be sayin’ right here that I’m not Jersey Craggs of Cincinnata, which I am, most days.”

The Yankee was looking into the young Englishman’s eyes as the latter had faced round in answer to the hearty slap on the back bestowed upon him, and for as long as two

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men may conveniently stare at one another, it was a curious tableau framed in the rough materials of a Texan inn-yard. On the brown handsome face of the Englishman there was not the slightest trace of recognition, while that of the hard-featured Yankee showed it in every line, and almost to the very tip of the straw between his straight thin lips—almost to the end of the longest hair in his scraggly goatee. It sat on the bridge of his long hooked nose, and laughed from his cold steely grey eyes beneath the bushy eyebrows, as much as to say there could not possibly be any mistake about the matter.

“My name is not Frank Somers,” said the Englishman, with an amused smile.

“Then what the British heliograph is it?” returned the Yankee, in blank amazement. “I never heard you called by any other name down to Denver two years ago. Look here, you limb of the Old 'Un, you caan't buldoze me. Why, ef any one was to twist out the tire of all creation and knock it up into a crowbar, I'll bet my penultimate dollar he wouldn't prise it out of this orphan that you're Frank Somers, late of Denver.”

The expression of amusement deepened on the Englishman's face.

"If my name would help you at all," he said, "I will give it you: Joe Brereton, of Sefton Hall, Wilminghurst, Sussex, England, at your service. I have never been in Denver, and I have never had the pleasure of meeting you before."

It was apparent to an intelligent observer, who had not developed the faculty of seeing what was not there, that this was a case of mistaken identity, but the idea that he had met an old friend died hard on the face of Jersey Craggs of Cincinnati. He looked at Joe Brereton at first as if he had not heard correctly, then as if he were mentally weighing him against Ananias, to see if he might perhaps be found wanting in mendacity. Finally, the straw travelled from one side of his mouth to the other. He smoothed his goatee meditatively, and said—

"Waal, this flogs creation and comes near beatin' the United States. And yew ain't Frank Somers? Well, I'm ding-busted. Same brown eyes, same curly brown hair, same straight nose, same clean-shaven face,

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same—no, it ain't though, Frank Somers had a bit knocked out of a front tooth and yew haven't. And he had a Yankee sloop tattooed on his right arm. Show, to make double sure."

Joe Brereton rolled up the shirt-sleeve of his right arm, and displayed an undulating sea of muscle without a ship of any kind in sight.

"I suppose Frank Somers hadn't a mark like this?" he said, rolling up the other sleeve, and disclosing a curious round mark that had evidently been burnt in on the flesh with a red-hot seal.

"No," said the Yankee, inspecting it closely; "that proves it. Yew haven't got the ship and he hadn't that there hall-mark. So help me, Geordie Washington; blow me, stuff me, skin me, bust me, General Grant! Yew and Somers are tew different people turned on the same lathe. Waal, I guess that's a socdollager—a darned old paralytic stroke; what do you say?"

"Oh, it's extraordinary enough; but there's no law against two people looking very much alike. I dare say if you were to see Frank Somers and myself standing together you

would at once notice a great difference between us."

"I guess I jest shouldn't," replied the Yankee. "Yew could have played Frank Somers on me for a month, and I might never have known it."

He paused for a moment, and a far-away look came into his eyes. Then he continued—

"Waal, you're Mr. Brereton anyhow, and I hope we shall see something of each other once in a way. I've just taken up that ranch down the river—plenty of cattle—plenty of mud—jest enough grog to swear on easily—no wife—no kids—no society—no darned business to go there at all. Now then, youngster, hurry up with that buck-jumper. Sling us them reins—stand out of the way, and mind the mud. So long, stranger ; give us a look up."

Putting spurs to his horse, he was out at the gateway and off in true American style before Brereton's English blood had quite grasped the fact that there was nothing at all unusual in a Yank who had let the world get ten minutes ahead of him trying to catch it up again.

"I'll go down and see him to-morrow when

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I've finished that little bit of fencing," said Brereton to himself. "He looks a bit wild and sly, but he's amusing, and there's not much to choose from in the way of society about here."

CHAPTER II

ON the following evening, Joe Brereton rode down the river to Jersey Craggs's ranch, and called upon him. The Yankee, who said he was more than glad to receive his visit, treated him with all the hospitality at his command, and the conversation flowed evenly with the grog.

Craggs began early by telling Brereton all his family history that he could recollect, and, naturally enough, the latter, feeling that it was tale for tale, narrated the best part of his. With Craggs's story we have nothing to do, except to remark that it went into details, perhaps with the object of inducing the other to do the same. But with Brereton's narration we are closely concerned, as in the progress of this story we shall require some introduction to his people in England.

When Craggs had polished up the history

of his life until it shone with an artificial splendour, and astonished even Craggs himself, Brereton thanked him heartily, for the Yankee's way of putting things was mightily entertaining.

"That's my little history, stranger," said Craggs in reply. "I bet a dime yours will pass another hour or two, and it's just as well to tell it in case of accidents. Once I jagged a man's feelin's horrid all through not knowin' that his father had been hanged."

Brereton noted the twinkle in the Yankee's eye, and replied—

"Very well, to spare you the pain of wounding my feelings, I'll tell you my history. There's nothing so wonderful in it as yours—no double executions—scarcely even a ride on a whale's back or an accidental slip down the falls of Niagara; and it may appear absurd to you, but I cannot lay claim to a single wholesale massacre. But such as it is I'll tell it to you to while away another hour or two."

"Don't forget to while away the whisky meanwhile," put in Craggs, pushing the bottle towards him.

"Thanks," said Brereton; "I'll have some

presently. I'll begin my history at the year one, and when I get to the age of discretion I'll have a drink."

We have not so much time to spend in killing time as Jersey Craggs and Joe Brereton had, and therefore we must condense the latter's history into a space as brief as possible. It may be well to state, however, by way of preface, that, although the narrator was obviously killing time, the listener had the aspect of one who was improving the occasion to the best of his ability. As he sat there with one lean leg crossed over the other, his arms folded, a long cheroot between his lips, and a placid camp-meeting smile upon his face, a keen observer might have been prompted to probe into his sly eyes for some motive for drawing Brereton's family history from him. Whatever that motive might have been, Brereton, being an honest Englishman, did not go out of his way to suspect it. But to his history.

Skipping his birth and the many amusing little details of his early life, which the Yankee artfully evoked and raked into a retentive memory, with a question here and a query

there, we find Brereton at the age of eighteen running away from home because he and his half-brother, Michael, could not hit it ; indeed, before they got very far in any joint undertaking they generally hit one another, and the end of it was that Joe, being of a hasty, erratic disposition, left home one day, saying that he could not endure life in the same country with such a cad as his half-brother. He went to America, vowing that he would never come back until he was a millionaire. Then perhaps Michael would not be continually attempting to blacken his character in his father's estimation, so as to bring about his discomfiture in the matter of the inheritance. Since that time he had written to his father once or twice, giving an account of his doings, and his father had replied in a severe, but affectionate, strain, to the effect that if he did not return home by Christmas of that year he should be compelled to regard Michael as his only son. To this letter he had not yet replied, as the matter needed mature consideration. One thing that tempted him strongly to go home was the fact that there was a sweetheart in the case.

"Waal," said the Yankee at this point, "I guess you've reached the age of discretion now—have a drink."

Brereton accepted ; then he proceeded to tell of one of those "sweetest girls in all the world," Nora O'Neill, who had been the sunlight of Sefton Hall from her babyhood, for her mother had died when she was a child in arms, and her father, a captain in the Navy with Brereton's own father, had been killed in a duel forced upon him by a Spaniard abroad, and, dying in Captain Brereton's arms, had left his little girl in his care. Thus Nora knew, but never felt, that she was an orphan, though perhaps by this time she had realized that she was practically brotherless, for Michael had always been something less than a brother, and he, Joe, especially in the few years before he ran away, had always been something more. Why should he not linger on the sweetness of her last kiss and her passionate promise to wait for his return ? Why should he hesitate to tell Craggs the sacred feelings which he would not have told to an equal ? Craggs was an outsider—a sympathetic inhabitant of the wilds—an utter stranger, to whom private

family histories and affairs of the heart were nothing more than so much water of conversation to dilute the fiery whisky one gets in those parts. Moreover, Craggs's intelligent and sympathetic appreciation of the veriest detail encouraged Brereton to talk and talk and talk, until his listener knew all about Nora and Michael, until he could picture old Captain Brereton and Joe's mother with ease, and find his way through Sefton Hall and its surroundings without a guide. After two or three hours, in which time the artful Yankee drew his talker out on the most important affairs that he had lived through in England—his life after he left home did not appear to interest Craggs in the slightest—Brereton said he must be going.

As he rode away towards his own ranch up the river, he patted his horse's neck, and said—

"Great Scot ! it's a treat to have some one to talk to, if it's only an illiterate but honest Yank."

At that moment the illiterate but honest Yank was sitting at his table scribbling away as if his life depended upon it. Long after

Brereton was at home in bed and fast asleep, this artful one was filling reams, even with what some might have regarded as the most unimportant details of Brereton's life history. Towards dawn he gathered it all up, and packed it carefully away in a drawer.

"There," he said, "I guess this honest Injun don't come across two men so much alike as Joe Brereton and Frank Somers for nothing." Then, after a pause, he added, with a meditative drawl, "I don't see whar's the use of there being two men exactly the same in the world. It's a drawback. It's apt to lead to complications and confusions. Well, there—reckon it up. If there's two men so near alike that the Almighty couldn't tell the difference between 'em with a telescope, they might get mixed up, and through bein' so much alike might run away with each other's wives by mistake. Oh! it's a tall switching error that; and I hev small doubt that Providence does it through a cussed desire to create misunderstandings. It don't seem right that two men should be turned loose on the world both exactly alike—no, it don't. It's like expressing the same idea twice in the same way. Skin

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me if it isn't like filling up the same gap in the universe with two men where one would do. If mistakes like this are allowed to go on, what's to prevent Creation from turning us all out of the same mould and letting us rot about anyhow? This kind of thing will have to be nipped in the bud. It can't go on, and it shan't go on—not while there's a hairpin like me left to regerlate matters."

CHAPTER III

"I HAD a little difference of opinion with my man to-day," said Brereton, one evening, when he and Craggs were sitting together after a hard day's work at mending the fences. "He was very impertinent."

"He looks it," said Craggs. "What did he do?"

"Well, he's an argumentative fellow, and wanted to make out that we could do the work much quicker his way than mine. I told him to go to some Stygian address, and said he could take up fencing down there in what fashion he liked, but while he was on my ranch he would have to do it my way. He replied that my way was a darn-fool of a way, and that if the ranch belonged to him he'd run it on scientific principles."

"He wanted to run the show himself, eh?" said Craggs, looking interested.

"Yes. I said I'd punch his head if he didn't shut up. He was quiet for a bit after that, but presently he walked up to me in a slow sort of way, and said, 'Don't move; you've got a centipede on you. Keep still; I'll fix him.' Then, as cool as you like, instead of fixing a centipede, he collared my six-shooter, calmly put the muzzle to my shirt, and pulled the trigger. The thing missed fire, and I knocked him down. I got the shooter and told him to squaddle, which he did just as fast as he could make it. He won't come back, I'll swear. It's a beastly nuisance; I shall have to get a new hand on the job."

"I guess I can put you on the track of a good man," said Craggs, "and at the same time set a deserving friend of mine on the track of a first-rate master. I'll put my cowboy on the best mare and send him off to B—— with a message, and your man'll be here by to-morrow night—if he's a breather."

"Right you are; trot him along. That's very kind of you. It might have taken me days scouring round for some one."

It was on the following evening that the man arrived, and Jersey Craggs was at his own ranch to meet him.

Tomlinson was a square-set man with a heavy expression. His small grey eyes twinkled when he met Craggs, and, as if he had already smelt some deep design on the part of that individual, he inquired by way of greeting—

“Hello, what’s the game now?”

All the reply vouchsafed by Craggs was to let down one eyelid as much as to say, “Maybe you can see half the game through the other window of my soul.” Then beckoning Tomlinson with a long, lean, crooked finger, he turned on his heel and walked into the house. His immediate object was to place a bottle of whisky and two glasses on the table.

When Tomlinson had filled one glass and drunk it off straight, Craggs said—

“Maybe you don’t happen to want a ranch, or I might even say two ranches for the price of one?”

“I guess I don’t want any ranches at all unless my right to ’em is sartin’ clear,” said Tomlinson, with a nasal twang of his vocal

chords. "I guess one of these all busted ranches is your own, right here where I've sot my feet, and you're going to clear out nimble like, so's you shouldn't be thanked for persuadin' some blind paraletic pal to go dead and leave his ranch to the first man what looks up over the horizon and spots it."

"Wal, I'm not sayin' yew haven't hit it, pard. I allow there's a pal of mine goin' to die jest before I make tracks. Yew see, it's this way. It's a darned pity for tew ranches to go to thunder when there's a man of your shape and size who's willing to pay me for mine and have the other one thrown in. Before I introduce you to my pal wot's going to die so's to leave you his ranch, I want to know whether you stand in."

Tomlinson hesitated. At last he said, "As I'm the darned idiot that's going to settle on these two hellsome ranches to please you, and as you're the gaudy spark wot's clarin' west to hide your sorrer in the busy hants of men, I guess the actual cause of your pal's death ain't no funeral o' mine. I'll sweep up after you, and tell people as how your pal and you have loped off west to buy cattle, or some such

cockheifer and bullfinch yarn, but I'm darned well transfigured if I'm going to crowd another notch on a busted conscience that won't hold it."

Jersey Craggs again filled his visitor's glass. "Sot your mind easy on that point, pardner," he said. "The notch will be on a good old seasoned conscience, you bet your gums, and that conscience won't be yourn. All you've got to do is to dust things a bit when I've gone, and as to all the rest, leave it to me. Your left hand needn't know what my right hand's playing at. But when you wake up one morning and find that these two ranches belong to you, jest tidy things up, and do the best by the cattle that you can. I'll tote my carcase round here again for the price of my ranch some time or other. Now, drink down, and say if you'll take it on."

Tomlinson drank down, then put out his hand, and said—

"Shake!"

"Now that's fixed we'll go along and swear you in as fencer *pro tem.*"

So Tomlinson became Joe Brereton's man, and proved himself a most punctilious servitor.

CHAPTER IV

DURING the first three weeks of Joe Brereton's acquaintance with Jersey Craggs, they were continually together in the evenings, and the latter would frequently refer casually to incidents in the former's life history. "That reminds me of what you were telling me about," he would say, referring to some particular point. "What was it again?" At which Brereton would relate some incident a second time, and the Yankee would smile to think how artfully he had led up to a detail of which he was not quite certain. It was astonishing, too, in what a plausible way Craggs could make amusing conversation out of details which were apparently of the most trivial moment.

Brereton was a good talker, and when a man has lived alone for a long time, it seems imperative that he should get himself off his

mind to the first good listener before proceeding to less personal matters. If ever there was a good listener Craggs was one. Now he crossed one leg over the other, thrust the points of his fingers into his perpendicular trouser pockets, and leaned back in his chair with his cigar hand free and a bland smile of appreciation on his lantern jaws. Now he would start up, and, pacing up and down the room, would give a little of his own experience by way of illustration, always with the fingers of his left hand in his perpendicular pocket and his cigar hand free, to lend emphasis to his remarks and scatter cigar-ash over the floor. He had all the points of a good listener, and he induced such a current of eloquence in Brereton, that the latter, apologizing occasionally for talking so much about himself, rambled on and on, just as an unsuspecting individual might to a dark writer of stories.

One night it happened that the talk flagged a little. Craggs was at Brereton's ranch. It was late, and Joe's history seemed to have petered out with the whisky. Craggs looked at the clock, rose from his seat, stretched himself, and guessed he must be going.

"Turn in here to-night," said Brereton; "Tomlinson will make you up a bed."

Craggs stopped his stretching, and remained fixed in a grotesque and ungainly attitude, which, if it had only been real catalepsy, would have out-Heroded Herod. Suddenly his arms dropped by his side, and he said—

"Since it's yew that asks me, Brereton, old hoss, I will, and that'll give us time for a game of euchre before turning in."

Brereton asked his new man Tomlinson to prepare a bed, and they sat down to cards. Craggs won the first game, and stroked his goatee in satisfaction.

"Another," said Brereton. "My deal."

"Ha! Joey, my boy," laughed Craggs, "it takes a good man to beat me at euchre when it's a game of skill."

"We'll see," replied Brereton; "a small element of chance often upsets the most consummate skill."

The issue of the game justified the remark, for Brereton won easily.

"Another," said Craggs.

"Ha! my friend," laughed Brereton, "it

takes a good man to beat me when euchre's a game of chance."

"We'll see," replied Craggs. "This will be the conqueror. If I win you may consider it proved right here that euchre's a game of skill. If you win it's a low down game of chance."

The play proceeded.

"I'm all but," said Craggs, at length, turning down his counters, "and you're only five. I shall win. There! see that?"

The dealer had just turned up the ace of spades.

"Pass," said Joe.

"I'll take it up," said Craggs. "Play to that!" he added, throwing down the right bower.

Brereton put his seven of spades upon it.

"One," said Craggs, leading again with his ace of trumps.

"One," said Brereton, taking it with his left bower, and then leading the king of spades.

Craggs put an eight of spades on it.

"Two to me," said Brereton, and led again with the nine of spades.

"Two to me!" cried Craggs, banging down

the queen with enough violence to break her neck. "Now we shall see!" With less violence he placed the seven of diamonds on the table.

"Euchre!" said Joe, gently placing the eight of diamonds upon it.

"Rumbo! euchre's a game of chance," said Craggs, "barring the fact that if I had begun with the seven of diamonds I should have won." Then he added, to himself, "But life and death are matters of skill with this child, bar nothing."

"Strange," said Brereton, "how a small element of chance upsets the cleverest calculations."

And so it proved in the game of life and death to which Jersey Craggs had referred.

CHAPTER V

BRERETON conducted his guest to his room and bade him good night, but some minutes later Craggs entered the room where his host was undressing, and said—

“Say, boss, I’d like to have a look at my horse before I turn in ; he sorter feels slighted like if I don’t go and smooth him down a bit last thing.”

“Right you are !” said Brereton. “You know the way all right.”

“Rumbo ! I guess I do.”

Craggs closed the door, and, passing downstairs and out of the house, was soon engaged in saddling his horse with great care, in preparation for a hasty flight when his foul night’s work was done.

Meantime, Brereton, who was about to get into bed, paused irresolutely, ran his fingers

once or twice through his hair, and then, going to the door, called to his man—

“Tomlinson, are you in bed?”

“Hello! No, I ain’t,” came faintly from a small room right at the back of the house.

“Come here a minute, then; I want you.”

Tomlinson presently appeared on the scene all garmentless except for what was still kept up by one suspender.

“What is it, boss?” he asked.

“Well, it’s like this, Tomlinson,” said Brereton, confidentially, “Mr. Craggs snores like thunder, and the last time I spent the night at his house I hardly slept a wink because my room was next to his. Does that sort of thing keep you awake?”

“Wal, no, I can’t say as it does,” replied Tomlinson, with a grin. “I snore like a quartz crusher meself, and it don’t never keep me awake.”

“Then perhaps you wouldn’t mind bringing your bedclothes and turning in here, while I have your room?”

“All right, boss; I’m thar.” And Tomlinson hurried away to execute the mission.

Brereton gathered up his bedclothes, and

met his man halfway along the passage bringing his own.

"Don't let Mr. Craggs know," he said, as he paused a moment; "it might hurt his feelings."

In some ten minutes' time Tomlinson was asleep and snoring in his master's room and Brereton dreaming undisturbed in the room at the back of the house. When Craggs returned from the stable, he paused by the half-open door through which the loud snoring of Tomlinson could be heard, and muttered to himself—

"Sleep sound, Joey, my boy; you'll sleep sounder presently."

He entered the adjoining room and lighted his candle. The flame showed his lean, cadaverous face set with his villainous purpose as he produced a long keen knife from a sheath in one of his top-boots. He had been sharpening it in the stable, and now, as he felt its point, he seemed satisfied with it.

He listened. The night was very still. Through his open window he heard the sound made by his horse champing his bit in the stable as if in a hurry to be away, and from

afar in the night came the barking of a dog. Standing in the doorway of his room he listened again. A clock on the mantelpiece downstairs struck one. He stole along the short stretch of passage that led to the adjoining bedroom, and softly opened the door. The snoring still continued. But he must guard against any outcry, for he did not want Tomlinson's help. He always did these things better alone. Retracing his steps, he secured a pillow, and presently returning with that pillow in one hand and his knife in the other, he made his way towards the dimly outlined form stretched on the bed in the corner.

If the picture of Jersey Craggs could have been struck then as he stood ready to spring upon his victim to strike a blow and stifle a death-cry, it would have shown him as a demon of the first fire. Some day scientists will show us pictures of things that no human eye could have observed—pictures derived from the bosom of the air itself, or from walls that may have not only ears, but sensitized surfaces. Then dark deeds will be as few and far between as the future villains of the Jersey Craggs stamp, for they must be

committed to all intents and purposes under the eye of man ; but the villain in question here was, as he would have put it, "merely under the eye of the Almighty," and for that he cared little, if at all. It was dark—quite dark enough for us to say that we did not see that foul crime ; we only heard a stifled, smothered cry, and a short struggle, then silence fell again upon the house—a silence emphasized by the regular beat of a death-tick in the wall—or was it the drip of blood upon the floor?—by the cry of an owl in the neighbouring plantation, and the weird barking of that dog in the distant night.

Without removing the pillow from the face of the murdered man, Craggs made his way to the peg on which he had seen Brereton hang his coat and waistcoat. All Brereton's papers which would be useful for his purpose he transferred to his own pocket. His watch and knife and belt also he annexed.

"No need to worry Tomlinson about it now," he said, hesitating a moment in the passage. "He'll find it out all right in the morning, and put everything square. I guess I'll leave a little note for him though."

Taking a pencil and an old envelope, which he found among Brereton's papers, he placed it against the wall in the dark, and scribbled as best he was able: "Tomlinson, my hair-pin, please receive two ranches. Don't be a clam—use Sunlight soap."

"There!" he said, with a chuckle. "That'll remind him that there's a little cleanin' job to be done in the mornin'."

He placed the envelope carefully on the floor, then found his way downstairs and out of the house. In less than three minutes he was riding swiftly away into the night.

"Now for Denver!" he said, leaning forward over his galloping horse. "One Joe Brereton's disposed of, and I guess I'll drive a tall bargain with the other. Ha! ha! Frank, you limb! You need old Jersey Craggs to help you sot your foot on the road to fortune. Tumble up, old hoss; you're good for thirty miles."

CHAPTER VI

IT was about five next morning when the real and only Joe Brereton awoke in Tomlinson's bed. In order to dress he had to go back to his own room, as he had left his clothes there. Coming to Craggs's door on his way, he knocked, and called out the time. Receiving no answer, he entered, and was surprised to find that the bed had not been slept in.

Returning to the passage, he was about to enter his own room when his quick eye descried an envelope on the floor. He picked it up mechanically, and noticed it contained something written in pencil, the words and the lines all running into each other. He went to a little window at the end of the passage, and spelled it out by the morning light : " Tomlinson, my hairpin, please receive

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two ranches. Don't be a clam—use Sunlight soap.”

Joe looked puzzled. The envelope was one that had come out of his own pocket, for it bore his own name and address in ink, while the pencil scrawl was that of Craggs.

“Looks as if it had been written in the dark,” said Joe to himself.

Thinking that perhaps Craggs, when he had gone out to see to his horse, had changed his mind about staying the night, which would account for his bed being undisturbed, he went into his own room to rouse Tomlinson.

“Half-past five, Tomlinson; roll out!”

But the form on the bed did not stir, and Joe, who had advanced into the room, stopped short, and started back, for the haft of a knife was showing outside the blanket, and upon the floor was a pool of blood. Joe rushed to the bed, and snatched the pillow away. The sightless eyes of Tomlinson stared up at him.

The sharp exclamation of horror with which he greeted this shocking discovery arose not so much from mere physical disgust as from the fact that his mind in a flash struck the thought that Craggs must have done this foul

thing in the same way as he had scribbled the words on the letter, viz. in the dark, in which case he could not have known that it was Tomlinson in the bed.

The obvious conclusion was, then, that Craggs had started in to murder him, Brereton, and had killed the wrong man. Had he discovered his mistake?

A sudden thought on this point prompted Joe to run to the window with the envelope which he had been crushing in his clenched hand. Smoothing it out, he searched it back and front, and at last said—

“H’m! thought so.”

The cause of his remark was a faint smudge of blood on the corner of the paper, from which simple fact he gleaned that Craggs must have written on the envelope after perpetrating his crime. This, as the message was to Tomlinson, was proof enough that Craggs was under the impression that the man he had just killed in Brereton’s bed was no other than Brereton himself.

“What a cold-blooded villain!” said Joe.
“What could have been his motive?”

The scribbled passage seemed to imply

that there was some understanding between Craggs and Tomlinson, that understanding being that he was to receive two ranches—Craggs's and Joe's, apparently—and to use Sunlight soap, presumably to wash away all traces of the dastardly crime.

So much for Craggs's good intentions towards Tomlinson, but when Joe cast a look at the bed with its murdered occupant, he reflected grimly that Tomlinson did not look very much like receiving two ranches. But why this sudden generosity towards Tomlinson? Craggs was not a man to give away ranches unless he had some ulterior object which justified the gift. Joe asked himself the question, What was this ulterior motive? And while he searched for it, he dressed himself. Once he thought he found it in his empty pockets; but no, Craggs would not leave two ranches in pawn for a gold watch and chain and a sum of twenty dollars.

Joe stopped the process of buttoning up his waistcoat—he had never abandoned the English trick of wearing a waistcoat—to ask himself another question, Why had Craggs taken all his letters and papers, his old pocket-

knife, his belt with his initials stamped on it, his cigarette-holder, and his sheath-knife? Notwithstanding these difficulties, Brereton was able to settle two points clearly in his mind: first, that Craggs was perfectly sane, and ~~must~~ have had some deep-laid motive for his crime; and, secondly, that he had left without making the discovery that it was Tomlinson, and not he, Brereton, that he had done to death. Yet as to why he had taken the comparatively valueless articles from his coat and waistcoat, and left a handful of cash in his breeches pocket, remained a mystery.

We need not tell of the inquest, of the verdict of wilful murder against Craggs, or of the vain search for that missing man. Nor need we remind the reader that, had he been in Brereton's place, he would scarcely have seen Craggs's motive as clearly as he now gleans it from the selected circumstances of the three weeks' acquaintanceship of these two men.

CHAPTER VII

IT was a warm evening in Denver some days after the events narrated in the preceding chapter, when a somewhat cadaverous Yankee was seen to ride into the town on a jaded mule. The reason why this man had let himself out of the train on a fairly steep up-grade, some fifteen miles back, might possibly be unraveled at sight when the name of the lean Yankee is written down as Jersey Craggs, late of Texas, formerly of Cincinnati. With a caress and a pull at his scraggly goatee, he had opined that maybe the station would be a dangerous place for him, and therefore he had fired himself from the train on the up-grade, and posing as a man from nowhere in general, had bought a mule to carry him to Denver.

His first business on arriving was to ride straight to the house of one Somers, who

kept a store in the main street. Somers was not at the store, nor was he at his house near by, but a man came along who said he had seen him tacking home from the liquor stores. As far as he could remember, he had foundered in a field underneath a scraggly gum, while trying to light his pipe at an old pump there-under, which would not work.

"Do you calculate he's thar now?" said Craggs.

"Waal, I guess so," was the reply. "I couldn't tote him out of it, so I sot him up agen the tree and left him."

"Is there any water in that well?"

"Any a gad's quantity, but the pump's gone cronk."

"Rope there?"

"Nope."

"Bucket?"

"Nope."

"Rumbo! I guess you mean the old well by the gum in Barker's Slope."

The man assured him that Somers ought to be at that very spot unless the devil had left a check for him; and Craggs, having offered him his plug, set off down the street

towards the nearest tinker's shop, where he purchased a bucket for a quarter, and borrowed a coil of rope. With these he strode off over the fields and up Barker's Slope, until he neared the solitary tree that shaded the old pump and the well from the rays of the half-grown moon.

On drawing near, he saw a figure sitting propped up against the tree-trunk. Craggs never let a virtuous sense of indignation get the better of him. He took the situation as he found it, with neither a frown nor a wink. Setting down the bucket and the rope, he went up to the recumbent figure, and by the rays of the moon sifted through the gum leaves by the night breeze, recognized the features as those of the "late Joe Brereton," as he put it to himself.

Having ascertained that the man before him was practically Frank Somers, differing only from the normal in so far as Philip drunk might differ from Philip sober, he made no attempt to rouse him by moral suasion, but simply tied the rope to the handle of the bucket, and let it down the trap of the well. When he had drawn the bucket up full, he

carried it to the foot of the tree, and, poisoning himself in the attitude of a man about to extinguish a fire, dashed the whole contents over the luckless Somers. It was not until he had done this twice very thoroughly that he took much notice of the effect produced.

When with the third bucketful in his hand he saw that the patient was showing some spluttering signs of animation, he remarked—

“It’s all right, Franky, old pal. It’s only me—Craggs. Ef you’ll jest set still a bit, I’ll give you another.”

With this he let him have it full in the face again.

“How d’ye feel now, Franky?” he inquired tenderly, as if he were addressing a poor convalescent.

“Brrrrrr! What the——”

Somers, having got thus far, seemed to realize the hopeless inadequacy of words in such a woe-begone situation, and staggered to his feet.

When at length he found them, he stood in the open moonlight a drenched and dripping figure, half sobered, but swaying to and fro while he tried to get hold of the main threads

of the plot that was being unfolded beneath that tree.

Craggs put the bucket out of sight, and advanced towards him.

"Wal, you're a darned born fool to go tumbling down wells permiscous like. Lucky thing I happened to be around, or you'd have fulfilled that prophecy you paid half a dollar for down to 'Frisco. Let me hit it again—you were to rot at the bottom of a well—nice occupation that. Wal, old 'un, yew came mighty nigh on to it this time. It'll larn you not to go tired near a well, I guess. Now, Franky, switch on—get into gear—quit them jill-jells, and listen to me. A big fortune has dropped right into yer lap, Franky. Foller me, and I'll bust what I know right into yer ear."

He turned and strode away down the Slope, Somers scolloping a zigzag course behind him, and trying to find a coherent tongue. At length they reached Somers's house, where Craggs got his patient upstairs, and helped him to bed.

"No; not to-night, old 'un," he said, when Somers wanted to get talkative; "not to-night. I can't save yer bloomin' life and put

a fortune into yer hands in the same day. Besides, the whole thing depends on yer facial features, and them's all transfigured to-night. Why, yer own father, Captain Brereton, of Sefton Hall, Wilminghurst, Sussex, England, ef he could sot his peeps on yer, wouldn't know yer—you swop yer teeth he wouldn't."

Somers looked mixed, gave a grunt of despair, and said—

"Craggs, it seemsh to me as a shober Christian that you—you, I shay—ought to get to bed. You're not well, Craggs; not at all well. Take a full-length, life-size shoda, and go to bed; you'll be better in the morning, when you've shlept it off a bit. Good night, Craggs, ole hosh."

He turned over and went to sleep. Jersey Craggs smiled blandly, took a cigar from his waistcoat pocket, bit it, lighted it, drew a chair in front of the empty fireplace, removed some little ornaments that blocked up the available spaces of the mantelpiece, sat down, placed his feet where the ornaments had been, one on each side of the clock, and fell into pleasant reveries.

CHAPTER VIII

IN the morning Somers was himself again, fresh and smiling, apparently none the worse for his blind paralysis of the night before.

"Now, young feller, me, lad," said Craggs, when breakfast was over, "let's git to business. Stand up and let me have a good look at you."

"You seem to take a mighty fat interest in my personal appearance, Craggs," protested Somers. "Isn't my face made right, then? You've been taking the twist out of it for the last half-hour."

"Your face is your fortune, Franky; if it wasn't for them features o' yourn, yew might remain a poor man for the rest of yer life—that's what!"

"What d'you mean?" asked Somers. "If anybody wanted a good top for an umbrella—

stand, or a new idea for a gargoyle, they'd take your face, not mine."

"Now listen, Franky," returned Craggs, taking no notice of this good-humoured thrust. "When I was down to Texas lately I ran into a man who swore so flatly his name was not Frank Somers that I had to believe him. He had your Roman nose, your brown peep-holes, your curly hair, your bloomin' old clean-shaven face—to clip it short, he was the spouting image of you. D'ye twig the game, Franky?"

"No, not in the slightest."

"Follow my movements then. I cultivated this man's acquaintance; I told him my personal history, that history bein' the first darned thing that came into my mind, and in return he told me his. D'ye twig the game, Franky?"

"No, not yet."

"Follow my movements, old hoss. I got this man's history off by heart. His name—Joe Brereton—unmarried—left his home, Sefton Hall, Wilminghurst, Sussex, England, five years ago because he couldn't agree with his brother Michael—wants to marry his papa's adopted daughter, Nora O'Neill."

"Get on, Craggs, get on; let's have the thing 'in a face' to start with. Straighten it out first, and then go into details afterwards."

"Follow my movements and don't chatter, Franky. When old Captain Brereton dies, his son Joe, being the eldest, will come into all the spondulicks, marry the girl, live in grand style in an elegant house surrounded by gorgeous parks; in short, he will be a good-looking little king-god in his country—*ef* he totes his vanished carcass back before a sartin time. D'ye twig the game?"

"Go on—go on."

"Now, this Joe Brereton would have done all this, you bet, only unfortunately soon after he had finished letting me into his family history he died suddint, and it occurred to me that it was a darned pity that this villain of a brother Michael should marry that jule of a girl, and perpetrate his villainous offspring to inherit them estates—a pity, I say, a ragin' pity. D'ye follow my movements, Franky?"

"I'm hard on your track, Jersey; hard on it. I shall bite your heels if you don't hurry on."

Jersey Craggs winked his near eye. "It's a springy trick, sonny, an' it's been played before, but never with sech elegant material—Jersey Craggs, late of Cincinnata, to plot and plan, and Frank Somers to execoot the design. But there's jest one detail which must be clinched right here. Now, old pal, yew wouldn't think much of my services ef I gave 'em free gratis for nix, would yer? No, yew wouldn't. Wal, then, follow my movements. Ef I school you up in the manners and customs of Joe Brereton, prime you deep in his history, and stock your memory with the durnsame goods as was in his, hanty over to you his papers, watch and chain, pocket-knife, and all the odds and ends wot make him up a real concarn—ef, I say, I do all this, what is there in it for me?"

"Tell me your price, and then I can judge whether it's worth my while chucking up my bonanza here, which, as you know, brings me nigh a thousand dollars a year."

"Shucks, Franky; a thousand dollars is not a circumstance to what Joe Brereton's income will be if he acts proper. Five thousand pounds a year it is, and all I ask out of that,

old pal, is three thousand the first year and two thousand every following year."

"Is that all?" asked Somers, raising his eyebrows. "I thought you were going to say four thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine pounds nineteen and eleven-pence halfpenny the first year, and that every following year you would be generous enough to write the halfpenny off."

"No, it ain't all, Franky. It must be a stipulation that Jersey Craggs, late of Cincinnati, shall be an honoured guest at Sefton Hall. He's got his eye fixed on certain things, and what he wants mighty bad is influence—real English. Young feller, me lad, ef we stick together we'll rise to the top like—like——"

"Like scum. Blow me, Jersey, old man, you're a genius, and you go big licks. Well, I s'pose you are not aware I turned 'Camp meetin'' two months ago, and I don't know how I can reconcile this business with my religious principles."

"I guess you seemed pretty full of religious principles last night," grinned Craggs.

"Yes, that was the reaction from two

months' sober holiness. You can't serve God and Mammon in a swindle like this, Craggs, so I'm afraid I must chuck my religious principles over."

"Wal, that's one way of putting it," said Craggs. "But darn your religious principles—do you agree to my terms?"

"I guess I must, anyhow."

"Rumbo! read that."

Somers took the paper which Craggs handed him, read it through, and made a gesture of impatient ridicule.

"Do you want me to sign this promise to pay?" he asked.

"No, Franky; I'll sign it myself, and, let me tell you, young 'un, this is the handwriting you've got to larn, or you'll find the hull show falling to pieces. This is Joe Brereton's signature—see! And I calculate on a day coming when yew caan't help allowing that it's jonik—and, you see, I must be secured."

"H'm!" said Somers. "You always were clever at signing other people's names. I wonder you haven't been secured in Sing Sing long ago."

Craggs signed the document "Joseph Brereton," in the handwriting which he had taken great pains to acquire.

"There, now we're fixed up, old pal! I guess it's necessary, because you see a time might come when you might forget that you was ever Frank Somers; such lapses of memory hev occurred, you know, an' we must guard against 'em, Franky."

Somers laughed, but said nothing. Perhaps he was busy thinking over his chances of saving £2000 a year.

CHAPTER IX

BEFORE the Craggs-Somers scheme became workable there were many points on which it was necessary to touch up Somers in order to make his resemblance to Joe Brereton perfect and above suspicion. This process of "touching up" was a thing of double meaning; Craggs used the term artistically, as one might touch up a portrait, but Somers inartistically, as one who might be touched up with a spear-point or a thumb-screw.

"Now, there are several trifling alterations," said Craggs, referring to his notes, "which we must put in hand right now, so's to give 'em good time to heal."

Somers looked up from his work, which happened at that moment to consist of cutting a pipeful of tobacco from a plug with his sheath-knife.

"Alterations! Time to heal!" he gasped out between perplexity and astonishment, to say nothing of chagrin.

"Jest a few little touches," said Craggs, reassuringly. "Yew twig, the groundwork of the concern ain't exactly what you might call substantial. Joe Brereton's father might possibly hear some rumour of his son's death, and in that case he might not be certain you was the real Joe, unless you had, for instance, say a crushed little finger, jest as he had, and a——"

"H'm!" interrupted Somers, anticipating him. "I'll see you——"

"Show's bust then," said Craggs, "if you can't submit to a trifling job like that."

"I'm not afraid of it," said Somers, with a flash of his dark eyes; "but a little finger's a little finger, and if we'd been meant to chuck 'em away we shouldn't have been limited to two."

"Franky, we're egged on in the Scriptures to cut off our right hand if the darned thing stands in the way of our striking eternal life. Ef that is so, surely it would pay to trade away one little finger for twenty-five thousand dollars

a year. Yew could do a powerful lot o' good with twenty-five thousand dollars a year, Franky, and I'm darned if a man can do much with his little finger. Maybe 'tain't likely he can pull a wish-bone with it, or keep it clean for raking dust out of his peeper on a windy day; but hail, rail, and snow Columbus! he can't write cheques with it. Now, ef it was your thumb, or your pointin' finger, it'd be a big sight different. Will you have gas or whisky?"

"I'll have whisky," said Somers, resignedly. "I don't want any more gas. You ought to have been a preacher, Craggs, you could have persuaded all sorts to chop, swop, and barter their blessed right hands for some of your damaged stock of eternal life. Will I have gas! Why, d'you think I'd interrupt you so often if I wanted your all-fired gas? Trot out your whisky, I'd sooner have that. Come on—let's get it over."

"Franky's a bit put out at having to lose his little finger," thought Craggs; "but try me if I'd give a durn for fifty little fingers stuck all over me body. I'd lose 'em all for twenty thousand dollars a year."

While ruminating in this strain, he produced a bottle of whisky from a black bag, and filled a tumbler three parts full for Somers, who quickly drained it dry. Craggs then took a huge pair of pincers from his coat-pocket, and approached Somers.

"Let me see, Franky," he said, examining the little finger held out to him, "it was just above the first joint. There, that's about it."

The calm way in which Craggs fitted his pal's little finger into the pincers, and the cool expression of face with which Somers held it there to be crushed, showed that these two would stick at very little to gain their end.

"Ready?" said Craggs, at last.

"I guess so," returned Somers.

"Rumbo!"

Crack went the bone between the fangs of the pincers, and Somers, holding up the maimed finger, examined it critically.

"H'm! and I might want that finger some day," he said regretfully.

"Darn me if it isn't the wrong finger!" said Craggs, suddenly. "Wait—I'll refer to my notes."

He turned over the pages rapidly, and at

last, placing his forefinger on a note, he ran it along for a few lines.

"The little finger of the left hand," he said, turning to Somers. "That's all right, then ; isn't it ?"

"Quite correct," said Somers, draining another glass of whisky. "Any more alterations while we're about it ?"

"Yes, two or three little ones ; but you run round to the doctor, and get that finger seen to, while I squint over my notes and see exactly what's to be done. Don't let him take it off—any darned silly trick like that would mess up everything. I guess, if you have it splinted, it'll heal up into jest the sorter thing we want. Git, and don't be longsome."

CHAPTER X

IN less than half an hour Somers was back, with his arm in a sling.

Craggs greeted him with, "There's two back teeth gone from the left-hand lower jaw. That must be seen to."

Somers felt at the back of his lower jaw. "Just my luck," he said : "two first-class molars—sound as a bell. Surely they won't go poking about my back teeth, Craggs !"

"Wal, that's jest it. You never know where they mightn't light around. Sposin', now, Joe Brereton had written home, and told 'em he had got two back molars on a gold plate, what'd be more natural than that they should want to see 'em when he got home, eh? Oh no, Franky; you must have them molars coaxed out, and new 'uns laid in, or the show's bust. And wot's more, you must have a new tooth put in in front."

"Righto! Anything else?"

"Yes; there's got to be a gash on your left thigh, made by a slash with a sticker, when Brereton and his all-cussed brother was boys together; and, after that, a mark of a seal burnt in on his right arm. I've got a seal wot'll do that when it's red-hot."

Somers began to look worried. "I should like to see the end of this," he said. "I don't object to your monkeying my arm with a seal, as that's a kind of hall-mark, but what on earth do you want to gash my thigh for? D'you suppose I'm going about showing my thigh to people?"

"Must be done, old hoss. Supposing you was to go bathing with that precious brother of yours, d'you suppose he wouldn't want to see how the gash he made on your thigh was comin' up? Course he would, jest as soon as he'd want to size up that seal-mark on yer arm."

"All right, I don't care," said Somers. "Now, what about the Yankee sloop tattoo on my arm? He hasn't got that sure-ly."

"No; that's so, Smarty; but you may bet your bottom dollar he hasn't sent a cable home

sayin' he hain't got a Yankee sloop on his arm. No, sir ; that don't count, anyhow. He's got it on his arm now, and can explain it jest how he likes."

When the thigh had been gashed artistically by Craggs, when the counterfeit seal had done its actual cautery, when the molars were removed by the dentist to make way for the two on a gold plate, to say nothing of numberless little odd jobs in the way of finger-cuts, etc., Craggs remarked solemnly, as he rested his elbows on the arms of his chair and put his fingers together—

"There's just one other thing, Franky, an' it's this here. You know about that cussed French trick of taking the impression of people's thumbs? Wal, once, when I was talking to the late Joey, I brought it up casual like, jest ter see if he knew about it. He allowed that when he and Michael was boys, this trick was jest invented, and they used to brand their copy-books with their own thumb-marks in ink. Joe's master whaled him for this once, that was why he remembered it. Now, spos'n them copy-books should still be kickin' around, and some one seein' 'em,

brought the talk round into thumb-marks, you'd look well if they took it into their heads to compare yours with them in the copy-books. I don't say it's likely to happen, but it might."

"How are you going to fix it, then?" inquired Somers. "You can't make my thumb-mark like his."

"No, but we can wipe yours out, and you can account for it by some snake-and-walrus story. See the top of that finger?"

Craggs held up his second finger, and Somers looked at it. There was a granulated scar on the ball of the finger, scarcely noticeable, it is true, but completely obliterating the pattern of fine lines.

"When I was a boy, six years old," said he, "I put a lump of sugar on the stove and watched it melt. Then I dipped this dog-gone finger into it; but, before I could get it on to my tongue, this was the result. We'll soon fix that up, Franky. It'll only cost you a couple of lumps of loaf sugar."

Somers produced the sugar, an old spoon, and a spirit-lamp; and while Craggs enlivened him with snatches of "Dip your fingers in the stew," the operation was performed.

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"Well, I guess you've made a fine old mess of me," said Somers, when all the alterations and repairs were complete. "Now, I've got the cuts and bruises of two cusses on me—my own and Joe Brereton's!"

"Yew couldn't run the show without his'n, I guess," said Craggs, sitting down to light a cigar with the air of a man who had earned a spell. "And as for yourn, you got 'em all in Texas—naturally."

"Yes, it works out like a sum, don't it? Craggs, you're a genius, but you're a darned bloodthirsty one!"

Jersey Craggs accepted the compliment smilingly.

"Now, Franky," he said, "while them things is all healing, we'll proceed to prime you up with the manners and customs of Mr. Joseph Brereton, late of this world; and, in two or three months' time, ef yew go slack on the whisky and live simple, as becomes an honest Christian, them little marks and disfigurements will be as much a part of your bein' as the stuff I'm going to cram into you."

But Somers did not hear the last remark. He had fainted away.

CHAPTER XI

THE gradual Breretonizing of Somers, from the crushing of his little finger to the final touch on his mental and moral make-up, was a three months' course. At the end of this period Somers was well enough versed in all Brereton's acquirements and peculiarities to impose, not only upon any one who had not seen the original for five years, but even upon those who had known him more recently in Texas. He could now walk like Brereton and talk like Brereton; he cursed at the same temperature, and prayed at the same degree of fear—which was not at all; he had acquired the same likes and dislikes, the same jovial, good-hearted way. The physical make-up was everything that could be desired, the wounds and the breakages having healed in a manner with which Jersey Craggs could find no fault. Altogether the result was such

a perfect facsimile of Brereton that no man could tell the difference.

There is one matter that must be especially mentioned here, as, later on, it chanced to form a pivot on which turned some important events. Among the letters which Craggs had taken from Brereton's pocket was one from a girl named Rachel Cope.

"I've never been able to make this out," said Craggs, when he came to it in due course. "This must have been a girl he knew well in Florida. You can see for yourself that she was mashed quite soft on him, by the way she writes; and you can draw a sorter conclusion that, although he whisked her away from them Greasers and saved her life, he never made love to her. I guess she wouldn't have written like that if he had. No, he was a man of one gal, and that gal was thousands of miles away."

"Yes," said Somers, who, in his turn, had been studying the letter; "there's piles of love between the lines, and a good lot of it is stated as clearly as a girl could state it to a chap who didn't return it. He must have been a fool!"

"I guessed you'd feel that deeply," said Craggs, with a knowing wink. "That's why I tore off the girl's address. Yew're as good as engaged to Nora O'Neill, yew are; and complications is barred, sonny. All the same, you keep the letter; it'll help you to remember Joe Brereton's way with women ain't your way, and you must mend."

"Well, I promise you, I shan't make love to the first girl I meet," said Somers; "but, if a girl wrote me a letter like this here, I think, perhaps—— But there, you've taken darned good care that I shall never come across her, so what does it matter?"

He pocketed the letter, and they turned to other details of Joe's history.

When Somers's education was complete, he took it into his head to go to the clairvoyant, who, as Craggs had recalled, had told him that he would find a resting-place at the bottom of a deep well. This prophecy had fastened itself firmly in his mind, and, being a true American believer in clairvoyance, he wanted to have it confirmed or revoked, for two reasons. In the first place, he had already found a temporary resting-place in a well,—at

least, so Jersey Craggs had told him, and he had certainly not been in a fit state to deny it,—and he wished to know if this fact might not have fulfilled the prophecy, leaving him a happier future in store. In the second place, he imagined that Joe Brereton's body, for all Jersey Craggs knew, might have found its last resting-place at the bottom of a well; in which case the clairvoyant had, perhaps, mistaken that body for his, since it was similar in nearly every respect. After his visit to the woman, a little over a year before, he had believed the prophecy implicitly, for she had told him some events of his future which had since come true. But now that he had not only already been down a well, but could easily be confused with another, he was anxious to have a new reading; for, he had to confess it, this dark well in his pathway troubled him.

Without mentioning the object of his journey to Craggs, he took train to Central City, where the clairvoyant plied her trade. The little woman with the black hair and piercing blue eyes remembered him.

"You were here eighteen months ago," she said, motioning him to a chair. "You pressed

me to tell you the worst; and, I remember, that worst was that you should be found down a well. I'm glad to see it hasn't come true yet."

"Well, yes, it has," replied Somers. "I fell down a well three months ago, and a friend dragged me out. What I want to know is, whether my fate is satisfied with that, and will vary my last end a bit?"

The clairvoyant looked, not directly at him, but round about him, as if she were searching in some atmosphere that enveloped him.

"No," she said; "what I told you at first holds good. I see you at the bottom of a well. Stay—give me some object that is well imbued with your magnetism, and I may be able to tell you more."

Somers took Joe Brereton's pocket-knife from his coat-pocket, and handed it to her. Placing the object between her palms, she was silent for some moments.

At length she spoke—slowly, but surely—as she followed her vision.

"I see you in an inn. You are bargaining with a man—a very florid-looking individual—about the sale of some property. You have

come to terms. The man is paying you with a number of fifty-dollar bills. You take a book out of your pocket and write him a receipt. You sign it 'Joseph Brereton.' It is dated June 6, 1901."

"That's to-day," said Somers.

"Can't help that; there it is," returned the clairvoyant. "You take a drink with the man, and you tell him that in a week's time you will be in New York, and ten days later in England."

"Where is this taking place?" asked Somers.

"A long way from here. In a very out-of-the-way place—yes, it's real lonely. Now you're going out to get your horse. You look very happy. You unhitch the horse from a post, get on, wave your hand to the man standing at the doorway of the inn, and ride out of the yard. There is no one else on the road for miles. I should think you will ride a long way before you reach your destination."

"Can you see that destination?"

"No; I am able in this case to see only what is happening in its regular order."

Somers looked perplexed. "I think you must have confused the date on the receipt," he said at length, "for to-day is the 6th of June, 1901, and I am sitting here with you, and am not at all likely to get on a horse, nor to sell any property. If you have not made a mistake in the date, you must be mistaking me for some one else."

"I do not often make mistakes," she returned. "The date was June 6, 1901, and the man who wrote the receipt was you, even to the crooked lump in your little finger there. Besides, Joseph Brereton is your name, I suppose?"

"Yes, that is my name, certainly; but there must be some mistake somewhere. What you have just told me is so manifestly impossible that I begin to doubt whether, after all, I am bound to rest at the bottom of that well."

The clairvoyant was silent. She still held the pocket-knife between her palms, and her eyes were fixed on space.

"Strange!" she said. "I am puzzled. I said your end was a violent death. It now appears to me in a very different light. You will live happily for many years, and die in

your bed honoured by all who know you, and deeply mourned by your wife and children."

"That's better," said Somers, with relief, for he knew that all this could not relate to the man whose death was certified by Jersey Craggs; "that's heaps better."

"Not so fast. Is this pocket-knife your own, or is it tinged with the magnetism of any one else?" She swept her hand across her brow with a distracted air as she spoke.

"It is my own," lied Somers. "Read my past from it and see."

"No; I will read no more. You seem to be two people having the same objects, but separate. You, sitting here, die a violent death; you, a thousand miles away, live a happy life, and die in your bed. You who are sitting there before me are at the same time riding along a lonely road a great distance away from here. I have never met anything so strange as this. This is a case which baffles me. I withdraw my prophecy about the well, and I will charge you no fee."

Somers tried hard to get her to continue

the séance, but she would not, neither would she accept the fee which he pressed upon her. She seemed put out with herself at having delivered oracles which were in their nature self-contradictory.

CHAPTER XII

WHEN Somers left the clairvoyant, he turned the whole thing over in his mind, and confessed to himself that he had fairly clear proof of the honesty of the American psychic. Jersey Craggs did not believe in such things—in fact, he laughed them to scorn, and Somers wished that he could do the same. But on summing up the facts he was unable to do this. In the first place, she had said that he was two people, and this he had to admit was perfectly true ; but, at the same time, she had spoken of his other self, Joe Brereton, as if he were still alive. That, to begin with, thought he, was an error, and if so, one of her prophecies must necessarily be false. As Joe Brereton was no more, how on earth could he be about to meet a violent death or live a happy life and die in his bed ? Obviously he could do neither

of these, and Frank Somers was inclined to think that it was the real Joe Brereton who was already at the bottom of the well, and he himself who should live happily till he was old, and then die lamented. This flattering unction pleased him, and he tried to lay it to his soul ; but, at the same time, he was puzzled to know how it was that the clairvoyant had made a mistake in the date of that receipt, and yet had read the signature correctly. Supposing the clairvoyant's reading of that receipt was actually true, then it meant that Joe Brereton was still alive and well. This, of course, was absurd, as Somers knew that Craggs was not such a fool ; but still his mind dwelt on the point, and when he got out of the train at Denver, he was smiling grimly at the thought of testing Craggs to see if he was absolutely certain that Brereton was dead.

He went into a store and bought a new hat as different as possible from his own. Then he purchased a waistcoat, and put it on, but concealed Brereton's watch-chain from view. In addition to this he donned a pair of gaiters, and thus attired in a fashion which might give the impression of a man from Texas, he

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proceeded to his own house, where he knew he should find Craggs.

When he arrived at the door he knocked loudly. In a few moments there was a step in the passage, and Craggs himself opened the door.

"Mr. Jersey Craggs, I presume?" said Somers, in his best Brereton.

But Craggs merely stared at him without moving a muscle.

"They said I should find you here. You remember me—Brereton, of Texas. I want to see you on a little matter that concerns both of us."

Craggs, who had been staring hard at Somers's face in silence, now gave a sniff, as he always did when his mind was made up on any point.

"Step right in, Mr. Brereton," he said. "I guess I'm at your service."

When they were in the living-room, Craggs touched him confidentially on the shoulder, and said—

"Franky, that new tooth in front must be toned down ever so little. If it hadn't been for that there tooth I might really have mistook

you for Joey, even knowin' es I do that he's a deader these three months or more."

"Didn't it cross your mind at first that I was Joe Brereton himself?" asked Somers.

"Wal, I'll allow it did; but I knew it couldn't be, and I was only waiting to find some point on which I could nail you. Darned silly trick for a man of your attainments, Franky."

Somers laughed. "Then, you're quite sure," he said—"quite sure that Joe Brereton is a deader?"

"Quite sure!" said Craggs, in amazement. "Tare and 'ounds, Franky, what pertikler breed of idiot d'you take me for?—the hydrocephalotic, tain't likely!"

"Did you see him die?" asked Somers, who was not easily put off a point.

"Don't ask impertinent questions, Franky," said Craggs. "It ain't to my interest no more than it is to yourn for me to say he's a deader when he ain't. Yew know Tomlinson the cowboy? Well, ask him who swept up the late Joe Brereton's remains and made things tidy, so's to save troublin' the coroner unnecessarily."

Somers had to give in, and the clairvoyant's mixture of truth and error remained a mystery.

The truth of it was not sufficient, however, to prevent Somers from setting out for England some ten days later, to work the swindle by which he and Craggs were to reap a fortune. Craggs himself accompanied him to New York, where they proposed to break their journey for a few days. No letter or cable was sent to Captain Brereton announcing the return of his son, as Craggs judged that Joe himself would not have done that; he would have made it an opportunity of springing a grand surprise upon them all, he thought, especially as by so doing he would allow Michael no opportunity of instilling fresh virus into his father's mind in regard to the scapegrace Joe.

CHAPTER XIII

A PECULIAR adventure overtook Somers in New York—an adventure which revealed to him that Joe Brereton's character had possessed a trait which his could never hope to acquire. This trait, as the reader will presently discover, was that of dealing justly and honourably by women.

On the afternoon following his arrival in New York, Somers was walking along Madison Avenue when he noticed a carriage coming towards him. The face of the occupant, a beautiful girl, attracted his attention, and when the carriage, which was travelling slowly, was almost level with him, the girl happened to turn her eyes in his direction. No sooner had her glance met his than she gave a start, and spoke quickly to the coachman. Then, as the carriage drew up to the kerb, she turned a face

full of smiles and blushes towards Somers, and waited for him to approach.

Somers was never backward in matters of this kind. He turned, and drew near to the side of the carriage, making his most up-to-date bow.

"Joe!" she cried, "fancy meeting you here! I thought you were in Texas."

For the moment Somers was puzzled, but the sparkling eyes, the blushing cheeks, and the glad laughing lips of the girl before him emboldened him to make a cute guess. It was certainly not Joe's sister, for he had none—who else could it be than the writer of the impulsive love-letter which had so puzzled Craggs? This flashed through Somers's mind in the moment that was occupied in shaking hands, and he determined to see at the very beginning if his guess were correct.

"And you, Rachel," he replied, with feigned surprise. "I thought you were in Florida."

"Then you got my letter?" And she managed to conceal her face beneath one drooping wing of her fly-away hat, while she added in a fainter voice that trembled, "But, Joe, you didn't answer it."

"Yes, I did," said Somers, quickly; for he saw that this beautiful girl was without doubt pining for love of Joe, and, though unloved in return, she was unable to restrain this pleading reproach. "It is I who should ask *you* why you took no further notice when I sent you back a letter telling you—— Well, perhaps, as you ignored my letter, you would sooner not have its contents repeated."

Rachel turned pale. "Did you answer it?" she asked, in a tense voice. "It never reached me. Perhaps my aunt destroyed it. Joe, tell me, tell me what was in it." The sudden fierceness of her manner gave place to a resigned look as she added, "The same old thing, I suppose, that it was better for us never to meet; that I abandoned all maidenly modesty and reserve in telling you what I did that night when you saved me from those horrid Mexicans."

Somers hesitated a moment, wondering whether he could safely ask her to repeat what she said on that occasion. He decided that it would be rash, yet he was very anxious to know.

"Was it that, or was it—something else?" she insisted.

Somers temporized. "Rachel," he said, "I kept a copy of my letter to you. Where are you staying? I will call and pay my respects to your aunt, and give you the letter."

"No, no," she said quickly; "you mustn't call. If my aunt once knows that you are here, she will take me back to New Orleans tomorrow. I don't understand her. She speaks of you with sincere admiration, but ever since you called to see her and had that long talk, she will not allow me to mention your name to her. I'm going to L—— this afternoon to see an old school friend. My aunt will come to the railway depôt with me to see me off by the 2.30 train, so you take the 2.10 and wait for me at L——. Then it's a two-miles walk to my friend's house, and if the letter that you bring with you contains nothing horrid, I will make my call very short; but if it does, I shall stay there so long that you would not feel inclined to wait for me."

The girl's tone had become almost merry, but Somers, realizing with a ready wit that he was the wooed and she was the wooer, adopted a non-committal expression of face rather inclined to severity.

"I will be there," he said, meeting her lustrous dark eyes frankly. "And in case we miss I will give you my address."

While he was scribbling his address on a piece of paper, her face brightened at the thought that he cared enough to provide against this contingency, and her eyes rested on him with a look that might have shown any shrewd onlooker that she loved this man with a fiery kind of love, which, born of Southern blood, made short work of all reserve—and why not? At least, she herself would have asked that question, for did she not owe him her life and *much more?*

"There," he said, handing her the slip of paper, "I shall take the 2.10 train, and if we miss, you must write and tell me why. Till to-morrow, then. But wait." He stepped up to the coachman. "How deaf *are* you, anyhow?" he asked.

"As deaf as a post, sir," replied the man, without moving a muscle of his clean-shaven face.

"Good!" said Somers, in a low voice, handing him two dollars. "The deaf and the dumb are my especial care."

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As the carriage continued its way along the avenue, Somers remained a few moments on the kerb gazing after it.

"Whew!" he said. "Joe was a fool or else a saint. Maybe, being in love with the charming Nora, he didn't give a fig for any other girl. Well, anyhow, I'm neither fool nor saint; and, as I haven't seen Nora O'Neill yet, I don't see why I should stand out over this affair. H'm! I suppose I must go and write that letter."

As it happened, Rachel's letter to Joe was still in Somers's pocket. With this before him in the nearest café, he concocted the following reply, which purported to be a fair copy of a letter which Joe had certainly never sent to Rachel:—

"MY DEAR RACHEL,

"I have received your letter of the 10th of January, but I confess I scarcely know how to answer it. When I say that your words leave me as they find me—your true friend, no more, no less—I do not disguise from you that had you spoken them to me face to face I might have forgotten that I was your true friend. But as we are never likely to meet

again, unless it is by the merest accident, you will never have cause to think of me as anything else. My dear girl, you are a child, and simply because I happened to save you from something very dreadful, you overwhelm me with your grateful affection. But do not go too far. Soon, perhaps, you will be a woman, and then you will give your heart to some one who is more worthy of it than I am. My counsel to you is again, forget me—I am a wandering star, not worthy of so sweet and good a girl as you.

“Yours very sincerely,

“JOE BRERETON.”

“I guess that’s the sort of letter Joe Brereton might be expected to write,” said Somers, as he folded it up, and proceeded to thumb and crease it in order to make it look old. “And I guess, too, that it won’t put the fire out.”

CHAPTER XIV

SOMERS said nothing of this to Craggs, but on the following day he took the 2.10 train to L——. He did not wait inside the depôt, but walked a little distance down the road, along which he knew she must pass in order to get to the little village of L——. He did this because he wished her to come to the conclusion that he had not kept his word, and then to find out later that she had misjudged him. Somers was rather a student of human nature in his way; he recognized the full value of reactions and revulsions of feeling.

Having walked some two hundred yards down a little hill, he reached the outskirts of a pine forest, along which the road found its way, and there, in the shade of the trees, he waited.

In less than half an hour the 2.30 train drew up at the dépôt. A sulky sped along past him bearing two passengers. A buggy followed with some more. Then half a dozen people on foot went by, and that seemed the total number of passengers by that train. But in three or four minutes' time he saw Rachel come out of the dépôt, and look up and down the road.

"Will she be so disgusted that she will go back to town?" thought Somers, as he watched her. "No; she's coming."

Rachel had started down the hill towards him, but she was walking slowly, as if she had missed some one, and was merely killing time while waiting for the next train home. She approached the part of the road near which, concealed by the trees, Somers was standing. He saw that her face was pale, and there was a frown on her brow.

"There is no doubt this girl is madly in love with Joe Brereton," said Somers to himself; "and so much the better for me. What a lovely girl she is!"

He called her name as she was about to pass by: "Rachel!"

At the sound of his voice she started violently, and, turning, ran towards him, crying—

“Joe! Joe! it’s you; I thought you had not come.” And she stood before him blushing as red as a rose.

Then her eyes fell, and she seemed abashed. It was not so much a lack of modest reserve with her as an overplus of love that made her betray herself ten times a minute.

“I waited for you here because I thought possibly your aunt might change her mind and come with you,” said Somers. “Shall I walk with you as far as your friend’s?”

“Yes, when you have given me the letter,” she said, holding out her hand for it.

Somers took it from his pocket, and gave it to her. She turned away, and, her fingers trembling, she opened and read it, while Somers moved slightly in order to be able to watch her face.

When she had finished she placed it in the bosom of her dress, and turned to him with wide eyes.

“Do you still think me a child, Joe?” she asked plaintively. “I am nearly nineteen. Why do you always think of me as a child?”

I am a woman, and my grateful affection, as you call it——”

“Rachel,” said Somers, “I have always thought of you as a child, and when I wrote that letter, you were no more to me than that. But now—now you have changed; you are a woman, and a very lovely one too.”

She caught her breath at his words. They were like wine to her heart.

He drew near, and took her hand. “Sweet,” he whispered, “all that I said when I looked upon you as a child has flown to the winds. Rachel, I love you; I only knew it when I saw you yesterday. I love you madly.” He caught her round the waist, and drew her to him. “But for all that,” he went on, “as I told you, I am a wandering star. Forget me, Rachel; I’m not worthy of so sweet and good a girl as you.”

“No, no, no,” she answered; “I have had enough of trying to forget you. But I forget everything else when you are near me. Joe, do you really love me?”

For answer, Somers drew her yielding form nearer, until her lips rested upon his in a long kiss. Her arms locked themselves round his

neck, her heart beat against his, her very life drew a quivering breath of delight from his, and yet she did not know what a cruel trick was being played upon her. Perhaps this was proof that her love was one of those fierce passions which are but body deep in the human being.

When Somers, talking of love, led Rachel further and further into the forest, it was evident that she had lost all thought of visiting her friend. On and on they rambled in the quiet shade until, upon the soft mossy bank of a stream, they sat watching the sun sinking slowly down between the pines. Take two human beings, the one a man and the other a woman, set them down hand in hand upon a mossy bank in a secluded part of the forest where Mother Nature has control of all, and unless a cast-iron law has bound the woman and his own wrought-iron will the man, what saint would waste his time in admonishing them? Let Nature draw these two nearer, lip to lip, heart to heart, and would the angel of the Lord come down to tell the woman there were two men in the world exactly alike to all appearance, and that

she was folded in the arms of the wrong one? Let Nature go still further, and mingle these two in a whirlwind of unrestrained desire—would the god in that whirlwind have the heart to strike the woman dead with a revelation of the enormity of the man's deception?

In this case, woman's intuition revealed nothing to Rachel. It was that high arbiter, Chance, which in the end explained all when it was too late. Love such as theirs is a respecter of bodies, but not of souls. It is in the nature of passionate love to mistake the counterfeit for the real, and, while ignorance is bliss, even to make happiness of it.

CHAPTER XV

SEVERAL days after the events narrated in the last chapter, Jersey Craggs was strolling to and fro in the entrance hall of the hotel where he and Somers were staying. He had undertaken to defer his breakfast until Somers could join him, and he was filling in the time by chafing, not only at his companion's delay of the moment, but at his seeming unwillingness to leave for England. Craggs had made up his mind to set on to him as soon as he put in an appearance, and insist upon his taking ship that very day, but a little incident occurred which caused him to pursue different tactics.

As he was walking up and down, the early postman arrived with the letters, and Craggs stood by and watched while they were placed in the letter-board. Presently his eyebrows went up, and one corner of his mouth screwed

itself round into an eddy on his lean cheek. Then his brows came down in a frown, the eddy relapsed with a sucking sound, and he stretched out his hand for a letter bearing the New York postmark, and addressed in a woman's handwriting to "J. Brereton, Esq."

"H'm!" he said to himself. "I guess I know that handwriting. I reckon it's that girl that wrote to Joe before. Wal, mebbe 'tain't likely this is why he wants to stay in New York. Mighty strange complications here. The question for me is, Can I help him in the matter? And how can I help him without knowing what his little game might be?"

Slipping the letter into his pocket, he turned away, and sought a quiet corner of the smoking-room, where he broke the seal and read its contents.

"My dear love," it began; and at this point Craggs supplied the incidental music of a low whistle before continuing, "I feel that I must write to you, my heart is so full. Since that day in the forest—it seems ages ago—I have only seen you once. Could we not be always together, Joe? Now that I have given you

all that a woman has to give—all that you saved to me once in a time of danger—I feel that if I am not always with you I shall die. Oh, my love, you speak of taking me to your home in England! Let us go! Dearest, come again this afternoon to the pine forest—the same time, the same spot, and the same sweet words—that you will never, never leave me. Oh, if I thought that you could leave me I would kill myself, for now I could not live without you!”

And so the letter ran on, pouring out a woman's first love to a man who had gained it under false pretences, yet who would perhaps cherish it for a time—for several months probably, until he grew tired. The missive concluded with, “Do write as soon as you receive this, saying that you will come this afternoon. Address to R. C., 26, Penn Street, as before.”

Craggs stroked his goatee a great deal over this letter. He saw exactly what had happened. Somers had met this girl by some chance, and had played his part so perfectly that it had come to this. He saw also that if he left Somers to his own devices, the girl

would either accompany him to England, or persuade him to waste more time in New York. Either alternative was undesirable, the former especially, as Craggs knew that Nora O'Neill and Joe Brereton had some kind of understanding, and the harmony of the home-coming, and perhaps Joe's relations with Captain Brereton, would be seriously upset by his taking home an American girl as his wife.

The more Craggs thought of it, the more he was convinced that he must ship Somers for Liverpool within twenty-four hours. In the altered state of affairs it would not do for him to carry out his intention of persuading him to leave New York ; that would simply mean that if he went he would perhaps take Rachel with him. As Craggs found his way back to the entrance hall, he developed his plan, which, it is hardly necessary to state, was of a tricky nature.

Glancing round the hall, he soon espied Somers standing before the letter-board, scanning the contents with some considerable interest.

Craggs walked up behind him, and, laying his hand on his shoulder, said—

"Expecting a letter, Franky?"

"No, no," replied Somers, quickly; "I was just killing time waiting for you. Come on; let's get some breakfast. I'm starving."

Between eleven and twelve that morning Craggs again stood before the letter-board.

"Rumbo!" he muttered; "it's come. I'll take it to him."

Drawing down a letter addressed to Joe Brereton in exactly the same handwriting as the one he had opened in the morning, or as exact a facsimile as the skilful pen of Craggs had been able to make it, he sought Somers in the smoking-room, where he had seen him some minutes before busy writing.

"Aha, Franky!" he said, tossing the letter to him. "What would the fair Nora say to this, old hoss?"

Craggs had guessed what Somers would say—the only thing he could say under the circumstances.

"Nothing, dear Craggs—nothing; merely a little assignation. Must kill time somehow, you know."

With that he opened the letter. Craggs sat down near by, and, while pretending to

absorb his whole soul in the process of selecting, clipping, and lighting a cigar, watched his companion's face. Who should know better than Craggs what the letter contained? It conveyed to Somers, in lover's language, that the supposed writer, Rachel, mindful of his suggestion that he should take her to England with him, assented to this course, and the more readily because her aunt had suddenly made up her mind to take her to Chicago. She urged him to take her away that very night by the *Tuscan*, which was to sail at 8.30, otherwise she would have to leave with her aunt for Chicago on the following day. Moreover, she beseeched him to write at once, not to 26, Penn Street, as before, but to a certain 49A, Lothrop Street, where she had arranged to call for the letter.

When Craggs saw that Somers had finished reading this, he leaned back in his cushioned seat, and drawled—

“Say, young feller, me lad, I don't want ter stand in the way of a little innercent amusement, but it's real important that you should be getting home to your worthy parent in England.”

Somers looked up. "Right you are, Craggs, old hairpin," he said. "I'm getting sick of messing about. Besides," he went on, with a laugh, "this decides me. This fair lady has my name and address over here, and I shan't get rid of her unless I bevel off to England by the first boat."

He jotted down something, which Craggs guessed was "49A, Lothrop Street," on his blotting-pad, and then tore the letter up into small pieces lest Craggs should ask to read it.

"What is the first boat for Liverpool, Craggs?" he continued.

"Haven't the slightest idea," said Craggs, lying with that accomplished grace which came so easily to him. "You'd better go along to the shipping office before lunch and see."

"I will when I have finished this letter," said Somers.

Craggs sauntered away.

CHAPTER XVI

NO sooner had Somers left the hotel to post his letter and call at the shipping office than Craggs sallied forth to 49A, Lothrop Street—a little news-shop where he had arranged to receive letters addressed as stated. His object was to get Somers's letter as soon as it arrived. After lunching on the way, he reached the place about two, and received the letter which Somers had written two hours before. He was not surprised at the contents. It was a regular lover's letter, and Craggs, when he had denuded it of its honied phrases, gleaned from it that Somers would secure his and Rachel's passage as man and wife in the *Tuscan*, that she was to be there by eight o'clock, and keep well out of the way until the boat had started, as he would have a Texas friend to see him off, who would perhaps recognize her. He would come on

board the very last minute, so that his friend should not be able to visit his cabin, etc.

"That's all right," said Craggs, setting out again for his hotel.

As for poor Rachel, Craggs had so arranged it that when she called at 26, Penn Street, for a reply to her letter, it was there, and the handwriting was undoubtedly Joe's, for Craggs had practised the hand to some purpose. The letter told her in such lover-like language as Craggs could command that the supposed writer had to go down to Jersey City, and could not be back until the following day, when he would wait for her at the same place, at the same hour, and would repeat to her a thousand times the words she had mentioned in her letter. In the mean time she was not to write again to the hotel, as his friend might suspect something. Rachel almost cried over this letter, as to her a whole twenty-four hours was an endless period of time, but she set herself to look forward to seeing her lover on the following afternoon, and forbore writing again to the hotel.

That evening, at thirty-two minutes past eight, just as the gangway of the *Tuscan* was

about to be drawn on board, Jersey Craggs and Somers arrived on the wharf.

"Good-bye, Franky," said the former, grasping Somers's hand; "I'm too late to come on board. Write me as soon as everything is fixed up, and I'll come along and pay you a visit under your father's roof. If I don't hear from you in a month I shall look you up, anyhow."

"Right you are," replied Somers. "I expect I shall require your assistance pretty soon. I shan't write till everything's fixed. Good-bye."

With this he sprang on board. The gangway was shipped, and a minute or two later, while Somers was still leaning over the side waving his hand to Craggs, the *Tuscan* got under way.

"Wal, there air some people right here in this world what must be fooled fer their own good," said Craggs, as he turned away. "But I bet Franky'll be real mad when he finds that he's taken a double passage all for himself, and that Rachel knows nothing about this little affair."

* * * * *

The movements of Rachel Cope were, up

to a certain point, very much what Craggs had judged they would be. She kept the appointment named for the following day in the letter purporting to come from Somers, and having waited in vain for several hours, returned home weary and forlorn. In the evening she sent her aunt's maid surreptitiously to the hotel with a letter of mingled inquiry and reproach to her lover. In due time the maid returned with the letter undelivered, saying that Mr. Brereton was not at the hotel; he had left by the *Tuscan* for Liverpool the night before.

This was a great blow to Rachel, but she did not easily persuade herself that she had been deserted heartlessly. Surely there would be a letter waiting at the address she had given him—a letter which would explain his unexpected departure in some way.

She despatched the maid to see if there was any such letter, but she came back empty-handed.

Despair then began to creep into Rachel's heart, and all she could think of was to follow him to England—she knew his address—and there, before ending her wretched life, make

certain that she had been intentionally and cruelly deserted.

She would wait for nothing. She would take the first boat, or she should go mad. Turning up the shipping lists in the papers, she found that the *Lagos* was advertised to sail that very evening in an hour's time. It was too soon. She could not possibly do it. The next was on the following day at nine o'clock. This was the *Truro*, and she resolved to go by that, fully determined to find out whether her lover had deserted her faithlessly—a thing which she could not reconcile with Joe's character at all—or whether there was some explanation of what to her was a mystery.

"Ah!" she said, with clenched hands and pale face, "if it is as I have sometimes thought, that there is another one to whom he has promised himself, then I will—no, I will not kill him; I will kill myself, and that'll be the end of another poor broken heart."

CHAPTER XVII

MEANWHILE, leaving Frank Somers speeding into mid-Atlantic in the *Tuscan*, and Rachel contriving ways and means to speed after him in the *Truro*, to say nothing of Jersey Craggs totting up the proceeds of various minor swindles in New York, the reader will be wondering what the real Joe Brereton has been doing all this time.

We left him on his ranch with a dead body and a wholesome disgust. Now we find him in New York. During the three months in which Craggs and Somers had been preparing their gigantic trick on what they regarded as the certain knowledge that Joe Brereton was dead, that individual himself was busy on his own concerns in Texas. Within six weeks of the mysterious disappearance of Jersey Craggs, Joe had determined, in his erratic way, to give up ranching. The horrible tragedy, which,

but for a happy stroke of Providence, would have rung the curtain down on his mortal life, had sickened him of his home in the wilds; and it so happened that soon after his resolve to quit, he was approached by a man from Florida, who offered him very good terms for the purchase of his ranch. Joe accepted. The money was paid down, and the following day, the 7th of June, he determined to make a complete change in his life, and return to England. He was obliged to confess that, if he did not want to see Michael after so many years, he wanted to see his old father; and if it were possible that he should not want to see his father, he must, at all costs, see Nora O'Neill, for he felt that she who kept all other women out of his heart must be more definitely his. Accordingly, he packed his household gods in his portmanteau, and made his way to New York, where he had some matters of business to attend to before setting sail for Liverpool. His business in New York having been despatched, we find him and his portmanteau being conveyed towards the shipping quarter in a cab at a furious pace. The cabman had received orders:

to drive him to the wharf from which the *Lagos* was advertised to sail at 8.30. It was already 8.28, and there was still a good ten minutes' drive before them. Joe swore at his own good-natured, free-and-easy carelessness that had led him to put off leaving his hotel till the last minute. He swore at the driver, and the driver swore it was not his fault. Then Joe swore at the horse for a thing of three broken legs and a swinger, and the driver swore at the people who got in the poor thing's way. Finally, when they reached the wharf, and found that the *Lagos*, which had left punctually to the minute, was nearly out of sight, Joe promised to pay the cabman double fare for asking him to do impossibilities, and swore that it did not matter in the slightest, except for the fact that he had sent his father a telegram that morning saying that he was coming by the *Lagos*.

"When is the next boat to Liverpool?" he asked of one of the bystanders, who had something of the omniscient wharfinger about him.

"To-morrow night, sir," replied the man, "at nine o'clock."

"Ah! What boat is it?"

"The *Truro*."

"The *Truro*. Nine o'clock. Thank you."

Joe returned to his cab, and, jumping in, was driven back to his hotel.

"Shall I send the dad another telegram saying that I'm not coming by the *Lagos*, but by the *Truro*?" he mused, as he drove along.

"No, it looks bad to miss a boat, and to have to send one wire to correct another. Besides, the *Truro* is a faster boat than the *Lagos*, and she'll get there almost as soon."

So he decided then and there he would leave the matter as it was. And this apparently trifling decision—so great are the deeds that turn on little hinges—was the cause of a confusion and despair at home that he little dreamed of.

At half-past eight o'clock on the following evening, Joe Brereton, determined this time not to miss his passage, sat on one of the deck seats of the *Truro* watching the passengers come on board. He was interested to notice that the majority of mankind made a point of getting on board a steamer at least fifteen minutes before its starting-time. But his interest was increased when he called to

mind the fact that he had never yet seen a steamer start from anywhere without a narrow escape, or an absolute miss, on the part of at least one late passenger. Rising and going to the side, he watched the crowd below on the wharf, constantly referring to his watch, and giving that inevitable late passenger now twelve minutes, now ten, and now eight, to tumble up and get on board.

CHAPTER XVIII

AT five minutes to nine Joe Brereton began to think that a rare thing was going to happen. At four minutes he would have bet five pounds that this time there would be no late passenger. At three minutes to nine he would have lost, for just as preparations were being made to haul in the gangway, a porter with a dressing-case on his shoulder made his way excitedly through the crowd on the wharf.

“Make haste, ma’am,” he cried to the lady who was following him ; “make haste, or you’ll be left behind !”

The crowd made way for her, and as she set foot on the gangway in the wake of the porter, Joe marvelled that an old woman of between fifty and sixty—her grey hair told that—should have the courage to run it up to the last moment like this. But when he

saw this grey-haired, veiled old lady trip it up the gangway like a girl of eighteen, he marvelled no longer, except on the fact that there were certain women whose youthful vigour never left them, and whose faces and hair alone showed their real age. By the way, the grace with which that young old lady had come up that gangway reminded him of some one, he could not tell whom—— Bah! Fancied reminiscences are most illusive things, and often flit at random through the brain like a meteoric thought running amôk. He gave it up, and fell to watching the working of the ship as she was taken from the side of the wharf and turned towards the Atlantic.

It was not until they were three days out that Joe discovered how and why it was that the inevitable late passenger had reminded him of some one whose face and name evaded his memory. The passage had been rough during those three days, and consequently, although he was curious enough to cast his eye around the saloon table for the young old lady, and to take a casual glance among the passengers on deck to see if she had found her sea-legs, he was not at all

surprised to find her missing. She was not yet among the sea-doggy set, that was evident.

On the fourth day, however, the Atlantic was quieter, and there was something of the nature of a general resurrection. Pale, spooky people came up out of their bunks and paraded the deck, but they did not go down to dinner. Their state of mind indicated thin captain's biscuits and a cup of tea on deck. When Joe came up after dinner the sea was calming rapidly beneath a golden sunset, and the passengers, especially those who had seen neither sky nor sea for three days, were pacing up and down the saloon deck, passing and repassing each other. Amongst these Joe saw a figure retreating to the further end of the deck.

"Ah!" he said, "that's the inevitable late passenger. I recognize her by her graceful walk. Who on earth is it she reminds me of?"

Still asking himself this question, Joe followed the object of his remark. He had not gone far before his unobservant eye at last took in the fact that the lady's hair was not grey, but dark. He could swear that this was the

person he had seen tripping up the gangway after the porter with the dressing-case, but it was no old lady—it was a mere girl. She turned at the entrance of the saloon, and as she did so, Joe, who was now some six or seven yards behind, saw her profile. He stopped suddenly.

“Great Heavens!” he said—“Rachel!”

He stood there some seconds debating within himself whether he should go to her or keep out of her way. She had not yet seen him, and consequently either course was open to him. He thought of her letter which he had never answered, partly because, Jersey Craggs having taken it, he could not remember her address in New Orleans, and partly because he did not know what in the world to say to her. It had evidently been written in an outburst of girlish affection for him, and for the moment he thought his proper course was to keep out of her way lest— But when his thoughts had run that far, he laughed at himself for a conceited ass, and confessed that her girlish affection, or whatever it might have been, had surely cooled down by this time, especially as he had not answered

her letter, and still more especially as a lovely young girl like Rachel must have been sought after by better men than he in the mean time. Moreover, there seemed to be some mystery, if indeed she and the grey-haired lady were one and the same, and he had just enough curiosity to wish to solve this mystery. After all, though his heart was true in every sense to Nora, he had an honest affection for Rachel. A man of Joe's character could never be indifferent towards the young girl whom he had once saved from so horrible a fate as that which had threatened her. The result of his mental debate on the point, then, was that he made his way into the saloon, bent on finding her.

CHAPTER XIX

“**N**O, my son; your allowance is ample. I can't increase it by a single penny. Three hundred a year ought to be quite sufficient for a young fellow of five and twenty.”

“But, daddy dear, if Joe had been here all these years you would have been paying out six hundred instead of only three hundred.”

“Michael, my boy, if I have not told you, you might have guessed that every year I have placed three hundred to Joe's credit. I am giving him a last chance. I wrote him some little time ago that if he did not come home soon—I fixed a time limit—I should add a codicil to my will. He hasn't answered it; perhaps he has not received it.”

“Supposing Joe does not come back, how will that affect me?” persisted Michael.

Captain Brereton looked stern as he replied,

"Then, of course, his share falls to you." But his eye softened and his lip trembled as he added, "But he will come back; I feel sure he will come back."

"Not if he's making a fortune out there," said Michael, with a nasty sneer on his mouth which his heavy brown moustache could not hide. "Joe hates home like poison."

The words stung his father. His cheek turned almost as white as his hair, and his grey eye flashed. He was about to say something hard about his absent son, but controlled himself, and merely observed softly—

"I think you are mistaken in Joe. If his dislike of home is such that it could only be outweighed by monetary considerations, he would have been home long ago, for he knows how things stand. No; I think he has an independent spirit, prefers a free life, and likes to earn his own living. If he comes home it will be because he wants to see us all again."

There was a sneer in Michael's heart, but he did not let his father read it on his face. Michael had for years done his brother the injustice of supposing that the fact of his being

the elder son was the result of sheer malice on his part—an intention to rob him, Michael, of an allowance of six hundred a year all to himself, to say nothing of the first place in Captain Brereton's will. Michael did not think on this matter; he felt, and his feelings were most unreasonable. He had always been unjust to Joe, and had consequently grown to hate him. He had always been jealous of Joe, and therefore from the first had made his brother feel that life at home would scarcely be worth living with such a discontented, unpleasant, and unjust half-brother. This, together with the restlessness of youth, which takes sudden and erratic courses, was no doubt the cause of Joe's departure, and Captain Brereton's remark to the effect that if he came home it would be to see them all again, was, as the reader knows, perfectly correct, for in the words "us all," Nora O'Neill was very much included, if Michael was not.

This conversation between Michael and his father took place in the breakfast-room before either Mrs. Brereton or Nora had appeared in answer to the gong. Michael, who had made no reply to his father's last remark, was pacing

to and fro restlessly. This peculiar combination of rogue and fool, who had been clever enough to wedge Joe out of Sefton Hall, almost out of the paternal heart, and stupid enough to ask for an increase to his allowance before breakfast while the paternal stomach was yet empty, was now exhibiting that miserable hang-dog sourness which was the keynote to his disposition. The morning sunshine, falling upon Captain Brereton's white hair as he stood at the open French window, and showing his upright commanding figure to advantage, made a picture of a strong man who let the light of life shine full on his face. What a contrast to the thin stooping figure of Michael pacing restlessly to and fro in the background! And yet Captain Brereton had no clear appreciation of Michael's character; he regarded him indulgently through the eyes of his wife, who naturally made the most of her own son, especially when Joe, the son by the first wife, was standing between her and her ambitions.

Mrs. Brereton entered the room—a small, somewhat hard-featured old lady of a wiry habit—and kissed Michael affectionately.

"Where is Nora, my dear?" asked Captain Brereton, facing round.

"I think she's down at the gate waiting for the postman."

A frown and an evil look appeared on Michael's face. He knew why Nora waited and watched for the morning post. A silence fell upon all three: each knew what the others were thinking. But the silence was arrested by a girlish shout from the garden.

"Papa! Papa!"

The three in the breakfast-room gathered round the open window, and saw the figure of a girl of some twenty sunshiny summers running towards them with a telegram in her hand.

"He's coming!" she cried, on catching sight of them. "Joe's coming home! I guessed it was from him, and couldn't help opening it."

She paused on the stretch of pink gravel before the window, and held the slip of paper up to read its contents to them. Nora O'Neill as she stood in the morning sunlight had something of the freshness of roses about her. Her eyes were as beautifully Irish as any one could wish; her lips were very firm, but had

a sweet expression; her whole face was of the kind that might be described as tender; and her good-natured hair, coiled simply at the back of her head, strengthened the idea that her beauty was of that healthy, natural kind that could never be disarranged. The few small freckles which on each cheek extended almost to the shade of her thick, dark eye-lashes, added to her face a charm which was in no way dispelled by her delicately turned-up nose. At first sight she was charming, at second fascinating, at third and fourth, and so on to the ultimate ordinal, she was a woman whose heart was as lovely as her face.

Standing away lest any one should snatch the telegram, she steadied it in her hands, and read out in a clear, glad voice—" *Coming home. Sailing to-night in 'Lagos'—Joe.*"

There was a ring of triumph in the last short word, and joy danced and sparkled in her deep blue eyes as she waved the telegram above her head before handing it in through the window. Captain Brereton took it from her with trembling hands. He removed and wiped his spectacles, then, replacing them, he held his face up in the sunlight and scanned

the telegram himself. Having read it, he handed it on to Michael and his mother, and Nora took the opportunity to dart through the open window and catch the dear old man, whom she called her father, round the neck with both hands, and kiss him again and again on both cheeks.

"I am so glad," she said, as she took both his hands in hers and stood back facing him.

"So am I, dear," he replied, with something that looked suspiciously like a tear in his eye.

"Yes ; that's good news," said Michael, with restraint.

"It's an answer to our prayers, John dear," said his mother, touching Captain Brereton's arm, though she knew this could hardly be so in the face of her secret heart's sincerest desire that Joe would never return.

"Breakfast is getting cold," said Michael. "Come along, daddy ; you can't breakfast off Joe's telegram, good news as it is."

"Just think of it," said Nora, seating herself at the table ; "he'll be here in less than a week."

"In the mean time, will you have some

toast?" said Michael, handing her the toast-rack.

"I don't believe you care a bit, Michael!" returned Nora, half bitterly, having at him with her eyes.

"My dear Nora, I'm not a woman, to bubble over and make a fuss. You bubble away; don't mind me. I shall be just as glad to see Joe as you are, only I happen to be a man—and men don't bubble."

In Nora's eyes one might read the remark, "Call yourself a man?" but her sweet lips would not permit the words to pass. She made some other reply, then she and Captain Brereton on the sunny side of the table, and Michael and his mother on the shadowy side, proceeded with a breakfast in which, after all, Joe's telegram was the principal dish.

CHAPTER XX

LATE in the afternoon on the day of the receipt of the message from Joe, Nora was sitting in a little garden summer-house which, situated in a massive hedge of Banksia roses, looked out across the fields into the golden west. The more sedate among the rooks were cawing in the tall elms in a corner of the field, while the loud majority were wheeling into line against the sunset sky. Nora rose and stood in the doorway of the summer-house, pensive, dreamy-eyed, and happy-sad. A cluster of the white roses drooping overhead offered their delicate scent to her; a mavis sang of love, not so much in his tree near by as in her heart; the balmy evening zephyr played with the wayward hair about her temples, whispering messages from far across the sea, and there in the "golden lightning of the setting sun" she felt there was

a boundless joy in which she had a part. A trembling sigh rose from her breast. A look of intense longing came in her deep blue eyes. She leaned forward and held up her arms to something she saw there in the golden sky. At that moment some one passed through a gap in the hedge of roses and stood before her. She gave a little start, her arms fell, and she remained looking blankly into Michael's sinister face.

"More visions, Nora?" he asked, with a smile that just stopped short of a contemptuous sneer. "I thought you had grown out of that hysterical nonsense. What do you imagine you have seen now?"

"If you think it is hysterical nonsense why do you ask me?" said Nora, turning a trifle pale.

"I have no doubt that you actually see things," returned Michael; "but I've told you dozens of times that a skilful hypnotist can make his subject see all kinds of absurd things as clearly as we see these roses." He plucked one from the drooping cluster, and mangled it ruthlessly in his fingers as he went on. "When you see what you call a vision you

are simply hypnotized, and see whatever is suggested to you."

"But there was no one here to suggest anything to me," she said calmly, holding her own.

"That doesn't matter. Self-hypnotism is a common enough thing, and in certain states of mind you can suggest visions to yourself, which, if you are in the hypnotic condition, will appear as if actually taking place before your very eyes. I haven't studied this sort of thing for nothing, and I've never been backward in giving you the benefit of my conclusions."

Nora was slightly disconcerted by his argument on this point now, as she had always been in the past. She seemed in a confusion of conflicting thought and emotion, and said nothing.

"Tell me what you saw," asked Michael again. "The best way to get out of this habit of self-hypnotism and seeing things is to be perfectly open and outspoken about it. There's no telling what it may lead to if you treasure it up. Come now, trot it out in the open, and you'll find it won't affect you so strongly."

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His words sounded so reasonable, and his manner was so full of apparent solicitude for her well-being, that, after a little hesitation, she told him.

"I saw a ship," she said; "and——"

"Yes, of course," broke in Michael. "You saw the *Lagos* as clearly as you can see my boots."

"It must have been the *Lagos*," said Nora, raising her eyes to his face, "for I saw Joe standing in the bows."

Michael laughed in contempt and bitterness. "Well, I'm blest!" he said. "How easily women are deceived by their own imaginations! Look here! A calm evening, birds singing, a dreamy sort of sunset—all these are conducive to the kind of self-hypnotism with which you are troubled. Then the telegram that came this morning is uppermost in your mind, and suggests to you what I suppose is taking place in reality—a ship called the *Lagos*, somewhere in the Atlantic, with Joe on board. You are excessively simple, Nora, to be so easily tricked by your own imagination; and even simpler still to fancy that Joe cares two straws for you. Why, do you think that he would have stayed

away all these years if he thought anything about you?"

Nora's Irish eyes flashed at him, and the colour rose in her cheeks.

"I may be very simple," she said, "but you're simpler still if you imagine that I'm going to let you work round to a subject which I've settled once and for all with a flat 'No!' Joe may not care for me, but I would sooner have his frown than your warmest smile, which only freezes me. There!"

"Listen, Nora!" he cried, and seized her hand. "I know I am cold, and sometimes I think I shall lose hope of myself and become a bad man if you, angel that you are, tread me beneath your feet. Heaven knows how I could live a better life if you took pity upon me. Have you never thought, Nora, what it is to have a man's very soul in your power to save or to destroy? One kind glance from you would lead me to better things; one word of hope would fill me with high aspirations and noble resolves; one touch of your hand would guide me safe over the dark depths of my nature to the gates of heaven. Nora, I appeal to you. I am full of evil; nothing but

your love can save me from things to which, without you, I shall surely drift in the dark. Will you give me one word of hope?"

A student of the occult sciences, on looking at Nora's dark brown hair contrasted with her deep blue eyes set beneath black eyebrows in a face so perfectly oval, would have said at once that she was gifted with the faculty of clairvoyance. A student of human nature, seeing her return Michael's look of passion with a penetrating gaze and without flinching, would have said that her clairvoyance was a matter of seeing through those who could not see through her.

"That kind of thing does not deceive me if it does you," she said firmly. "I know you far better than you do yourself. Your words are clever, but there is a trick behind them. You would extract a word or a look of pity now, and when perhaps I am angry with Joe for having forgotten me, you will presume on that word or look. Besides, you are acting a part."

"But, Nora, I mean every word I say."

"No doubt; you act your part so well that even you are taken in. And you talk about

drifting into evil ways. Now, do you suppose that a girl like myself, without even a spark of what is called love for you, could cope with evil tendencies which you yourself have failed to check? But apart from that, Michael, I would try to help you—indeed, I would—if I could only trust you; but I do not, and cannot, so there the matter ends.”

She turned away decisively, and, passing through the gap in the hedge, walked up towards the house. Had she been deceived in her judgment of Michael? To gather from the expression on his face as he remained standing by the summer-house one would have thought not. He had a kind of beaten look, but soon he gave a sneering laugh, and shrugged his shoulders.

“Simple!” he said — “excessively simple! Whew! but it’s the sort of simplicity that takes some careful handling. She doesn’t know that she is only worth having for what she gets on her wedding-day by the terms of her father’s will; the pater even doesn’t know what that sealed packet contains until he opens it on her wedding-day. No; she is not aware that I have gleaned this interesting fact about

herself, and yet she dismisses my love-making as a lot of acting, and tells me that she cannot trust me. Strange that a woman should be so simple and childlike in some things, and as wise as a wizard in others. She believes her visions which are not genuine: why shouldn't she believe me?" And he smiled grimly as he turned on his heel and walked away.

CHAPTER XXI

“**T**HOUGHT - READING! Oh, do ;
it's such fun! Nora, you guessed
where they put the thimble the other
night ; see if you can do it again.”

The speaker was a fair-haired girl—one of a party of some nine or ten persons gathered in the drawing-room at Sefton Hall for the purpose of enjoying themselves according to the approved methods. They had exhausted all the names of books they could think of. The inevitable man with a padlock on his foot had shown himself as canvassing agent for “Locke on the Human Understanding,” and a blushing damsel had posed as Lady Godiva in full dress on the day after the ride, when some one, who had just met peeping Tom, pointed the finger of scorn at her, and remarked in the immortal words of Mark Twain, “Tom Sawyer!” These things had

all been duly enacted, and more than one ancient evening game had been resuscitated and thrashed out, when, in answer to some one's suggestion that they should try thought-reading, the fair-haired girl made the remark we have recorded.

"Do you believe in thought-reading, Captain Brereton?" asked a little lady, who, when she smiled, might have been dated at forty English summers, or when she looked natural, at thirty-five Scottish winters.

Captain Brereton leaned towards her, and said very emphatically—

"Well, you know, I used to laugh at it, but when Nora found that thimble behind a book in the library book-case, where I had put it myself in the dark, I made up my mind to believe in it."

"And did she really find it without being guided to the spot and pushed at it, as they generally do?"

"Oh yes; she said she saw it behind a small book. We asked what was the name of the book, and she told us. Then we adjourned in a body to the library, found the volume in one of the shelves, and the thimble

behind it. The strange part of it was that, as I had hidden the thimble in the dark, neither I nor any one else had seen the title of the book before she named and pointed it out."

"I think you must be mistaken in that, daddy," said Michael, who had been standing near by listening to their conversation. "Science admits the truth of thought-reading, but not of clairvoyance. Sooner than jump to the conclusion that Nora actually saw the book and the thimble as they existed in the shelf through a thick wall, I should maintain that she merely saw by sympathy with you the vivid impression of the thing in your mind. The latter, which is mere thought-reading, would satisfy all the demands of the case, and therefore we do not require the second-sight theory at all."

"But, my boy," said Captain Brereton, warming up, "if the impression did not exist in my mind, how could she see it there by sympathy? When I placed the thimble behind the book, I hadn't the smallest idea which book it was. I scarcely even noticed the shelf, let alone the position of the book in the shelf."

Michael held his ground without abating a single point of his contention. It was a very important question to his subtle and clear-reasoning mind. Had he known exactly how important this very point might prove in clearing up a mystery and in leading to the conviction of a murderer, perhaps he would not have stuck up for it so stoutly.

"You may not have seen the name of the book," he said, "but no doubt you noticed casually that it was a thin book, between two thick ones; and of course certain characteristics of the binding were evident to your touch. That being so, I cannot imagine any one handling such a book in his own library without having some idea of the title of it."

"But I tell you I hadn't the ghost of an idea of the title when I took the book out and replaced it. It was done so quickly and on the spur of the moment, that if I had been asked to put my finger on the book five minutes later, I could not have done it."

"I don't care," persisted Michael, doggedly; "it's quite possible to have a thing in one's mind without being conscious of it. I am quite convinced that the name and exact position

of that book had registered themselves in your mind, although you were not aware of the fact. It frequently happens that adepts at thought-reading describe incidents which have happened in the lives of persons present, but have been forgotten to such an extent that they are amazed at their being recalled. There is no doubt a subconscious memory with which the thought-reader comes in touch."

Michael's reasoning almost convinced his father, but he would not give in as he saw the clear importance of the point.

"Well, my son," he said, after a little puzzled thought, "we've often argued this point before, and neither of us can convince the other. Now, I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll write to Dr. L——, who, you say, is a great authority on these matters, and whatever decision he gives, we'll abide by it."

"Very good," said Michael, with a smile of triumph. "I shall be perfectly willing to abide by Dr. L——'s decision. But, in the mean time, we can test the thing for ourselves very simply."

"How, how?" said the little lady of forty summers, eagerly. "I'd give anything to see

a thing of this kind actually tested. Generally when I go about asking for a test, the mystery-mongers say, 'Ah, the laws of the occult world do not permit us to give tests of these things.' Do tell me how you will test it, Mr. Brereton."

"Simply enough," said Michael. "First, we'll hide an object so that every one here except Nora shall know exactly where it is hidden. Then, if Nora locates it accurately, well and good—thought-reading pure and simple. Then we'll select some one who will take another object and hide it somewhere in the house without any other person's knowledge. That person must then leave the house. If, under these conditions, subject to such variations as she may require, Nora locates the thing correctly, I will admit for the present that clairvoyance, or second-sight, has been sufficiently established; but if, on the other hand, she is unable to find it, I think you must admit that it is because its whereabouts is absolutely unknown to any one present."

"Capital, capital!" cried the little lady, clapping her hands. "It would be difficult to have a more thorough test. What do you think, Captain Brereton?"

"Well, there is one thing you have forgotten," said the captain. "A clairvoyant generally requires some connecting link between the lost object and herself. For instance, if she is to see an absent person, she must have a lock of his hair or some object peculiar to him."

"That is reasonable," returned Michael; "at least, it is as reasonable as most of the fads of clairvoyants. When we come to the clairvoyant experiments, I will detach a part of the object I propose to hide, and give it to Nora before having the remainder hidden."

CHAPTER XXII

MICHAEL was not long in setting the drawing-room in order. The girl with the fair hair acted as his assistant, and very soon all the guests were seated round the room, with a pervading expression of intense interest on their faces, for they had all heard of thought-reading, but few, if any, could actually claim that they had seen it properly done.

“Now, ladies and gentlemen,” said Michael, when all was ready, “as Nora has kindly consented to thought-read to us, I will just explain exactly how the thing works. It is claimed—indeed, it has been sufficiently proved—that, by means of sympathetic vibrations between the modified ether or nerve atmosphere surrounding one person and that surrounding another, an image strongly impressed upon the mind of one may be transmitted to the mind of another without speech or any

external sign. Now, for a mental image to be communicated in this way, it must be made very vivid in the one person's mind for the other person to get a clear impression of it. This frequently occurs in daily life, when it happens that one mind receives a sudden vivid idea, and another in close sympathy with it is in a receptive state. But it can also be done by way of experiment as we are going to do it now. Nora, if you will go out of the room and promise not to listen through the keyhole, I will explain the rest."

Nora withdrew, and presently they heard her playing the piano in the morning-room.

"Now, then," resumed Michael, "here's a thimble. I'll place it in the clock here. See!" He deposited the thimble inside the marble clock on the mantelpiece, and continued, "Now, what you all have to do is to concentrate your energies on the mental picture of that clock to the exclusion of everything else. Take a good look at it, and then picture it in your minds as vividly as you can. Ready?"

Everybody assented, and Michael, opening the door, called to Nora. The piano playing ceased, and presently she entered. Michael

immediately blindfolded her with a thick handkerchief, and led her into the middle of the room. Strict silence was then enjoined, while all, except Nora, concentrated their minds upon their mental image of the clock.

A minute passed and Nora remained perfectly still. Another minute went by, and in the silence the clock on the mantelpiece ticked guiltily. Presently Nora said—

“I see a clock ; it is the clock on the mantelpiece. I feel sure the thimble is inside it.”

She dragged the bandage from her eyes and looked round at the guests, and laughed slightly as she saw them in various stages of galloping astonishment.

“I was right, then ?” she said, untying the knot in the handkerchief.

All present found their tongues in a chorus of assent, which tailed off into remarks which showed that they were sufficiently astonished to want to see the thing done again.

Every one discussed the matter excitedly. Some became scientific, and argued ; others looked very wise, and quoted—

“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in our philosophy ;”

and others gave vent to their feelings in all sorts of unanswerable questions. One alone attempted to account for the matter in what she thought a sensible and critical way. It was the fair-haired girl, who remarked in a lull—

“We ought to have chosen something else, because as soon as we were all silent, the clock ticked louder than ever, and gave itself away.”

“Booby!” said her younger brother in scorn. “How did Miss O’Neill know the clock was giving itself away?”

But the fair-haired girl stuck to her point, and easily secured a repetition of the experiment. This time the thimble was concealed in the folds of the fair hair of the sceptic herself. Her hair was her chief attraction, and it was unlike that of any one in the room. This time she herself placed the bandage over Nora’s eyes.

The result was the same. The thimble was found as before, and the fair-haired girl was convinced. But her younger brother had the look of one who is “wiping something off a slate” as he inquired—

“Didn’t you have a sort of vain, conceited

feeling strongly impressed upon you by some one, Miss O'Neill?"

It was not long after this that an old lady of the party—perhaps the least interested of them all, as she was no doubt above such frivolities—rose to take her leave.

Michael sprang forward. "Mother," he cried, "just a second before Mrs. Armstrong goes. By the way, Nora, you're not to hear this. Run and play the piano in the morning-room again."

Nora obeyed, and when he heard the piano going, Michael resumed—

"Now, this is a final test. You all see this seal." He passed it round. "It's the old family seal with which Joe and I when we were boys arranged to brand each other. I branded Joe on his forearm, but he said it hurt so much that he hadn't the nerve to brand me, so I got out of it with a whole skin. When you have all looked at it, I will give it to Mrs. Armstrong to hide somewhere in the house, after which she will leave without telling anybody where she has put it. Wait. I will detach this little gold ring from it, and give it to Nora to serve as a link between her and the hidden seal."

With his penknife he severed the ring from the seal, and sent it out of the room to be given to Nora.

The seal was then given to the lady, who undertook to fulfil the conditions to the letter. Several minutes later, when, after having announced that the seal was hidden, she left the house, Nora was summoned from the other room and blindfolded. All present, acting upon the instructions given them by Michael, pictured the seal in their minds, and sat in silence.

It was some time before Nora spoke, and then she said slowly—

“I see a seal. Its face is about as large as a sixpence. Oh yes, it is—Michael, it’s that seal of yours.”

“Very well,” said Michael, motioning the others to be silent. “Where is it?”

“It isn’t anywhere. It’s only just a seal. I can’t tell where it is.”

“Try hard and see if you can locate it.”

“No,” she replied, after a silence; “it doesn’t seem to be anywhere in particular. I suppose it’s in your waistcoat pocket, where it usually is.”

“I think that settles it, daddy,” said Michael,

turning to his father. "She cannot tell where it is because nobody here knows. Therefore, it is not second-sight, but merely thought-reading from the minds of those present."

"Yes," said Captain Brereton; "I give in. I must have had an idea of the name of that book in the shelf, after all. By-the-by, Michael, it just occurs to me that Mrs. Armstrong is going to London for a few days early to-morrow morning, so you'll have to wait until she comes back before you find your seal again. But I expect she'll write. Be sure you don't lose it, my boy; it's been in the family for years and years, and the superstition has it that the luck of the Breretons goes with that seal."

"All right, dad," said Michael; then, turning to the lady of forty summers, he added, with a monkey grimace and a shake of the head, "Isn't he a clever one to change the subject when he's beaten?"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE following day Michael made a passing search for his seal, but did not find it. He expected Mrs. Armstrong to write, but it did not signify, as it was not a very important matter, and he dismissed it from his mind.

That evening, as he was sitting smoking in a garden-chair upon the lawn, an incident occurred which seemed to him far more important than the whereabouts of the seal. He was leaning back in the chair mapping out his subtle villainies against the blue sky, when he heard a step on the gravel path.

Looking up he saw the paper-boy hurrying up the drive. Michael was the kind of man that rushes for the evening paper, opens it eagerly, and having read some horses' names in the stop-press news, either cuts a caper or grinds out a swear word between his teeth, and

looks the fool he is. Accordingly, as soon as he saw the paper-boy coming up the drive, he ran to meet him.

Grabbing the paper the boy held out, he opened it where he stood. His roving eye steadied itself on the win-or-lose column, his brows knit, and a quick hiss came through his teeth. The inevitable swear word was about to follow, when, as his eye wandered upon the paper, his face assumed a peculiarly interested expression. Then, as if he doubted his eyesight, and wished to test the matter by hearing as well, he read out the following passage in a low tense voice :—

“‘WRECK OF THE LAGOS.

“‘Intelligence has come to hand that the steamer *Lagos* from New York has been wrecked in mid-Atlantic. Some twenty lives have been saved. No further details to hand.’”

“Joe’s boat wrecked!” ejaculated Michael, glancing hastily round to see that no one was near to observe his look of unmistakable satisfaction. “Very sad, of course, but good

news all the same. But he might be among the saved."

Michael stood still a moment, holding the paper in his hand, as he watched a little robin that hopped across the path near by. But he was not thinking of robins. His mind was at that moment the thoroughfare of a villainous scheme that travelled like lightning through it.

"I have it!" he said, folding the paper quietly, and placing it in his pocket. "Now, if I can only work off a vision of that wreck on the susceptible Nora before she sees an account of it, I might be able to score a point or two."

He walked up to the hall, and encountered Captain Brereton in the library.

"Paper come yet, my boy?"

"No, dad; I've been waiting for it. That boy's a nuisance; this is twice in a week that he's scamped it. I'll call in at the paper-shop to-morrow morning when I go to the village and speak about it."

"Yes, do, my boy; we can't go on like this."

"Do you know where Nora is, dad?" asked Michael, after several restless turns up and down the room.

"I think I saw her go down towards the summer-house, my lad."

Michael went out, and making his way through the gap in the hedge of Banksia roses, found Nora sitting in the summer-house, engaged in her favourite occupation of late—dreaming. The sun had gone down, leaving a summer glory in his wake, and Nora seemed reading the golden future from the strange, grotesque, and cabalistic-looking fragments of cloud that floated about the horizon.

She started slightly, as if from a deep reverie, when Michael stood between her and the sunset, and looked a little annoyed.

"Nora," said Michael, looking contrition itself, "I have found myself out, and have come to tell you that not for a moment longer will I attempt to stand between you and your love for Joe. Last time I spoke to you here, you said truly that you knew me better than I did myself. Something has come over me to-night which makes me despise myself, and shows me how you, too, must despise me for sneering at Joe in his absence, and trying to win you away from him, and for many little things which now appear very mean to me.

But it has been a jealous love for you that has prompted it all. Now, to-night I have a feeling of a better love than I have ever felt. It may not last long, it is true, but while it does, I will act by its light. It shows me that Joe is a better man than I am, that he is more worthy of your love. It also shows me that with him you will be happy, and that is what I desire. To-morrow I may repent of these words; but now that I see things in this clear light, I ask you to remind me of what I have spoken to you, on perhaps the only occasion when you have really trusted me."

Michael was a consummate actor, and on this occasion he deceived even Nora. She extended her hand to him, and said—

"Michael, this is noble of you, and I am sorry that I have made you unhappy; but we have always been like brother and sister, Michael, and what you have just said brings us closer together in that way."

Michael, who had assumed an attitude of going, stayed where he was on hearing this. He felt that Nora trusted him, and proceeded to work out his design. Had he been a man

of passion, a rash and hot-blooded sinner, this innocent girl's simple trust would have redeemed him from his villainy; but he was cold, calculating, lean, and his passion was not for Nora, but for the riches that were to fall to her lot.

Like a new-found brother to his sister, he talked eloquently to her, as a poet would talk in his divinest mood. One would have thought that he was unburdening his soul of feelings and thoughts that were the ruling beauties of his character; and Nora, as she listened, reproached herself for having misjudged Michael in the past. He could not be so hopeless if he could thus move her almost to tears with words that so accurately described her own highest thoughts and feelings.

But Michael was hopeless—altogether hopeless. While he talked he watched Nora's face for signs that he knew—signs that one as well read as he was in matters of hypnotism could easily detect in such a subject as the pensive, dreamy girl before him. Once a fixed look came in her eyes as he was picturing a dream he had once had, but she suddenly roused herself from the reverie into which she

was falling. Had she not done so she would very speedily have been in what scientists call the hypnotic state, and Michael would have led her thoughts gradually on and on, until she should actually see before her the vision he desired to impress upon her mind—the lie by which he hoped to turn her against Joe. For he was convinced that if once Nora could see Joe making love to another woman, and acting in a cowardly, dastardly fashion, she would turn from him in disgust.

In all his efforts to bring about this issue, however, Michael failed; and at length Nora rose, and accompanied him up to the house.

“Michael,” she said, as she paused on the steps a moment, “I was getting to distrust you, but to-night I am sorry that I have not trusted you better. I will treat you differently in future, now that you have shown me what a noble-hearted man you are.”

Michael turned his face away in the twilight. What hidden gleam of good there was in him was fanned into a blaze by her words. He took her hand in his, pressed it, and, turning away without a word, strolled into the shadows

of the trees beyond the lawn. There the good light that had struggled up for a moment died for want of the oxygen that his general moral atmosphere was unable to supply.

CHAPTER XXIV

WHEN Joe followed Rachel into the saloon on board the *Truro*, he scanned the brilliantly lighted place, searching among a dozen or more people seated about for the girl he had recognized ; but Rachel was not one of them. He then walked round the saloon, and looked in at a little nook curtained off at the far end.

Rachel was standing there, looking out at the sunset sky and sea. The golden light from without and the melancholy sadness from within her bosom, met upon her face, and Joe stood, with the half-drawn curtain still in his hand, gazing at the picture in silence. The curtain-rings jingled one against the other, and Rachel turned her head.

For a moment neither spoke. Joe's face was full of honest greeting, but Rachel's, which in the first moment of recognition had been a

confusion of blushes, love, and happiness, was now fast fading into a set paleness, which feared deception and faithlessness as the worst of all possible disasters.

"Joe!" was all she could gasp with faltering breath; while her thoughts, jostling in her brain, asked each other many questions: Why had he pretended to go by the *Tuscan*, and was now on board the *Truro*? Why had he left New York at all without telling her? Had he intended to forsake her cruelly; and if so, why did he now greet her as if there was nothing to explain? Her strongest impulse was to throw her arms around his neck and sob her perplexity away on his breast, but she restrained herself with a tightening of the lips and a flash of something that might have been pride in her eyes.

"My dear girl," said Joe, "what on earth's the matter with you?"

"Nothing at all," she replied; "I was only a little surprised to see you."

"Naturally," he replied; "so am I to see you. But you look suddenly ill. Have I frightened you?"

"No," she said quickly, regaining her com-

posure; "but I think a little explanation is required, don't you?"

"Well," said Joe, with a merry twinkle in his eye, "I think it is. I notice your hair has turned brown again in the last three days. I can't quite believe my eyes. There, there, I didn't mean to pry into matters that do not concern me. I beg your pardon."

Rachel had turned away in confusion, saying nothing. She could not explain without saying why she had assumed the disguise, and she was loath to admit that she was following him to England until she knew whether he had really intended to forsake her, and was now putting a bold face on this accidental meeting.

"You want me to explain why I have never answered your letter all this time—is that it?" asked Joe, thinking of the letter that had reached him in Texas.

She turned, and regarded him curiously. "No," she said, wondering why he should revert to that again, having explained it satisfactorily several days since. "Joe," she added imploringly, looking straight into his eyes, "tell me truly why you left New York."

"Certainly," said Joe, not a little perplexed

by her manner. "I am on my way home to my people in Sussex. I want to see them again."

"Yes, yes," she said impatiently; "I know that. What I want to find out is whether you were—running away from me, or whether——"

"My dear Rachel," he interrupted, "what are you talking about? Why should I run away from you? I don't look like it, do I?"

He held his arms apart with open palms, in sign of good faith and honest intentions; and she, ever a creature of impulse, forgot her doubts, and threw her own arms round his neck, sobbing—

"Oh, Joe, I thought you had forsaken me, so I disguised myself, intending to follow you to England to make sure there was no mistake. I thought you had gone by the *Tuscan* two days ago."

The proximity of this beautiful girl whose arms were around his neck, whose heart was beating hard against his breast, and whose trembling mouth was held up to be kissed, so scattered Joe's thoughts that he could not take in the true nature of the situation from

her words. The only thing that took a firm hold on him was that Rachel's affection for him had blossomed into something that looked like love. He was too busy analyzing his own feelings to demand what she meant by the strange words. The question with him was, Should he kiss that lovely mouth and comfort her, or should he not? It was a question that did not wait long for an answer. He thought of Nora O'Neill, whom he truly loved, and then, with gentle hands, he disengaged Rachel's arms from his neck, and, holding her firmly by the wrists, led her to the cushioned seat at the farther end of the little nook.

"Rachel," he said quietly, as she sat half-numbed by this tender repulse, "if I were a brute, I might now undo the good I did when I found you in a tight place with those Mexicans. If I were a really strong man, I should treat you with the greatest severity. Being neither, I am going to talk to you as a brother who has a sincere regard for your welfare."

She regarded him with eyes that told of a reaction of spirit, even to helplessness, and waited for the worst, while he proceeded to

reason with her on the foolishness and risk of her action in running away. What would her aunt think of her? What would her circle of friends think? She was headstrong, blind, and rash to throw away the well-being of a lifetime for a foolish infatuation of the moment. But for all her wilfulness and foolishness, he, Joe, would see that she should come to no harm. He would take her back by the next boat, and deliver her over to her aunt with a solemn oath that, as far as he was concerned, she was the same sweet innocent girl that she had always been.

"Joe, Joe," she moaned reproachfully, when he had got thus far, "who should know better than you that I am not the same innocent girl that I was a week ago? Now that we have known what love is together, surely you cannot thrust me away like this?"

"Now that we have known what love is together!" repeated Joe, raising his eyebrows in amazement. "What do you mean, Rachel?"

She looked at him steadily, as if to see behind his words.

"Have you forgotten already?" she asked, slipping her hand over his wrist. "I am not

blaming you, Joe ; do not think that. Heaven knows I loved you, and gave myself to you willingly, but if you talk to me in that cold, matter-of-fact way, just as if you had forgotten it all, I shall go mad. Do not jest with me any more ; you will kill me."

"My dear girl," said Joe, emphatically, "you talk as if I had bound myself to you by some everlasting tie."

"So you have," she replied warmly. "I have breathed the same air of heaven with you. I have throbbled with the same great pulse of love sweeping through us. I have dissolved my being with yours till there was nothing in the wide, wide world but you—you—you! Do you mean to tell me after this that we are not united by all that's holy in love? Do you mean to say that we were not really and truly married solemnly, there on the mossy bank of the stream beneath the pines and the sunset glow? Was not that bar of gold in the sky our altar-rail, and that mossy bank our bridal bed?"

Her bosom was heaving, her eyes flashing as she spoke these wild, impassioned words. When Joe frowned sternly at her before reply-

ing, she whimpered, but quickly set her lips, and, rising from the seat, faced him resolutely, with pale cheeks and quivering nostrils.

"Rachel," he said quietly, "you have been dreaming, seeing visions, or else you are drawing on your imagination extensively. I have never bound myself to you in any way. You are under a delusion."

"Say I am mad," said Rachel, bitterly; "and if that is not the truth now, it will be very soon. Oh, my God! you promised less than a week ago to love me for ever, and now you deny it, and cast me off like a toy that has lost its novelty."

Joe was effectually staggered by these words. He stared at her curiously for a moment before replying; then he said—

"I promised less than a week ago to love you for ever? I swear that I did no such thing. I have not seen you since I left Florida. You have been dreaming, or you must be mad, Rachel."

Indignation brought the colour to Rachel's cheeks.

"I understand," she said hotly, wrenching her wrists free; "I see it all. You changed

your mind, and wanted to be rid of me, so you left New York without a word. Now we have met again by accident, and you want to make out that I dreamed it all, that I am the victim of hallucination, or, better still, that I am mad. Oh, cruel, cruel! Why did you ever save me from the Mexicans if you are going to kill me like this? I will not make a scene, or you will have me locked up as a mad girl. No; what I have to do I will do quietly."

Her face was now pale as death as she turned from him and passed between the hanging curtains. Joe stood like one paralyzed. He could form no theory as to the meaning of it all, except that Rachel was indeed mad. Yes, mad—nothing else could explain it. As he lingered on this uneasy thought, he started suddenly. If she was mad she ought not to be left to herself. She had said that what she had to do she would do quietly. In a moment he was hurrying in pursuit of her.

CHAPTER XXV

WHEN Joe reached the deck the twilight had set in, and there were very few people about. He had not gone far before he encountered Rachel, who, seeing him coming, had turned to face him.

"Why are you following me?" she asked, frowning at him.

"Because I want to reason with you," he said.

"Oh, your reason, your philosophy, your brotherly advice—I am sick of them." She paused, then with a hard, bitter laugh said, "You made an appointment with me which you did not keep. I will now make one with you where you can reason with me and give me brotherly advice to your heart's content."

"When, and where?"

"In five minutes' time—at the bottom of the sea."

As she hissed these words she sprang towards the side, and with a clean leap plunged into the waves that tossed and frothed along the vessel's side. Joe, who was unprepared for this, was too late to stop her, but he was not too late to follow. Crying "Man overboard!" in a ringing voice, he plunged over the side, and in a few seconds' time they were left far astern within thirty yards of each other.

As Joe shook the water from his hair and eyes on rising to the surface, he scanned the heaving sea about him for some sign of Rachel. In a moment he saw her rising on the top of a swell, and taking a last despairing look after the vessel. Then she seemed about to throw up her arms and drown herself when she caught sight of Joe. There was a life-belt quite near to her, which some one had thrown from the stern of the ship; but though she must have seen it, she struck out without hesitation in the direction of Joe, who, for his part, was fast making progress towards her.

She swam with a good strong stroke, and presently they met on the crest of a wave. Joe stretched his hand out to her, and she seized it.

"There is a life-belt," said Joe. "Let us get it."

But as they sank together into the trough, Rachel wrenched her hand free, and pressing near to him, wound her limbs about his in such a way that he was powerless to move to any purpose.

"You are mine for ever and ever," she said, kissing him while he struggled to keep afloat—"mine—mine. You shall never love any one else."

Joe's presence of mind did not fail him. He took advantage of the moment when Rachel had spent her breath in words to fill his lungs with air and drag her suddenly under. As they sank, Joe felt her lips meet his and her arms tighten in a long embrace. He knew that she was determined to carry his soul away with hers, and she seemed likely to achieve her purpose unless the breath in his body would serve to keep his senses about him until hers were gone. Presently, in the midst of this death-embrace, they reached the limit of their descent, and, after a pause, began slowly to move upwards. Rachel's lips now fell away, her limbs slackened about him, and she lay in his

arms limp and lifeless. Quickly he freed himself, and, grasping one of her hands, struck upwards with all his strength. His brain reeled, but he held on until he saw the green water lighten above him. A moment more and he was on the surface, gasping for breath. As he rose to the top of the swell, he heard a shout, and saw a boat making towards them from the ship, some distance away. He turned on his back, and, drawing the inert body of Rachel across him, lay afloat for a few long breaths. Then, realizing that he was wasting time, and that Rachel's life no longer depended on keeping her head above the surface, but on reaching the boat as soon as possible, he struck out with all the speed he could command under such difficulties. The rowers, seeing that he was dragging something after him, redoubled their efforts, and in less than twenty seconds he and his lifeless burden were hauled on board the little craft.

"Attend to her, quick—quick!" gasped Joe, pointing to Rachel. "There's life in her yet. I'm all right."

One of the officers who had come in the boat directed the sailors to pull for the ship

with all possible speed, and then rapidly performed the preliminary work of first aid.

"The heart still beats," said Joe, who, with the officer, was kneeling beside the body in the stern of the boat.

"Yes ; but it will be a matter of time," replied the officer. "We must get her aboard and hand her over to the doctor."

They touched the ship's side without relaxing their efforts for a moment. Then Rachel was speedily carried on board, and delivered into the care of the medical man.

"It would be better," mused Joe, while dressing after his warm bath—"it would be better, when all is done that can be done, that she should die. She will either succeed in killing herself some other way, or she will go quite mad, or, if she does neither, it's a very bad look out for me, that's all."

At this moment the steward brought him some whisky he had ordered.

"How is the patient ?" asked Joe.

"She's come to, sir ; the doctor says she'll pull through with a few days' rest. How did it happen, sir ? Nobody seems to know."

"She was sitting on the side," replied Joe,

without hesitation, "when all of a sudden back she went. I think she must have fainted."

"She must have come round under water then, because we saw you through the telescope swimming towards each other, and then you both went down together. Women's fools in the water; they always lose their 'eads. I s'pose she clutched on for dear life, and you couldn't move?"

"Yes, that was it," said Joe, stirring his toddy. "I had to go down with her until she was half-drowned before I could do anything."

"H'm! I thought as much, sir. Women's that fools in the water, even when they can swim. They lose their 'eads jest as easy as they lose their 'earts, bless 'em."

As the steward retreated with this sententious piece of philosophy, Joe thought that if Rachel had lost her head instead of her heart, it would not have mattered so much. As it was he foresaw difficulties of a pronounced type. What should he do with the girl? He felt cross with her for having come back to life, and he felt doubly cross with her because he suddenly discovered he was so glad that she

was not dead. For a brief moment he began to disbelieve in his true love for Nora. The fierce pathos of that dying embrace of Rachel's remained with him, and he half wished that he had kept the appointment at the bottom of the Atlantic with her, for he felt a distrust of himself. His love for Nora was of a high and ideal nature, whereas he was disturbed to find that Rachel's passion had infected him physically. At war with himself, therefore, he prepared for a struggle in which he was determined the higher part of him should conquer.

Having completed his toilet, he strolled up on deck, where, as soon as he was recognized in the uncertain light, he was overwhelmed with the congratulations and praises of his fellow-passengers.

"Heigh-ho!" thought Joe, "if they knew all the circumstances of the case, they would pity me instead of congratulating me."

CHAPTER XXVI

TO strong wills bent on evil so intently that they effectually conquer all tendencies to good, opportunity comes sooner or later ; and though Michael had failed in his strange, subtle scheme early in the evening, he succeeded that night in accomplishing his design by a chance that he had not looked for.

Returning to the house very late, when all were in bed, he repaired to the library, and there sat musing moodily in the dark. He was a sleepless kind of being, and preferred sitting up in an armchair to tossing about for an hour or two in bed. To-night he did not feel in the mood to read, so he sat in the dark, looking out through the window at the stars that shone brightly in a clear sky above the tree-tops. He lighted a cigar, and pursued his own train of thought.

He had been sitting there for perhaps a little more than an hour, when his ears detected a faint sound coming through the half-open door of the library. He started up, and listened. There was some one walking about in the hall. He could hear a soft, steady, measured footfall, as if made by bare feet, and there was a faint sweeping sound of some light drapery on the hall floor.

He approached the door, and looked into the hall. There in the darkness he saw a white figure moving slowly. It came towards the library. He stood aside, and as the figure passed him, he recognized Nora's face in the vague light. She was gazing with fixed eyes straight before her, and as she advanced into the room, Michael saw that she was walking in her sleep.

At the window she paused, and stood there looking vacantly out. Michael drew near to her, and by the light of the stars saw her eyes fixed in a glassy stare, her face pale, and her arms drooping listless. Her whole appearance was that of one without any active will. Michael could hardly believe his senses. It seemed as if Providence was giving him

several points and playing into his hand. Here was the opportunity he had wished for. He had tried in vain to get control of Nora's will by means of her dreamy sympathies, and now here, without any trouble, her will was handed over to him. He would foist upon her a vision which she should regard as real. The somnambulistic condition was, he knew, closely allied to the hypnotic, and he quickly made up his mind on his course of action. She knew nothing of the wreck of the *Lagos*. He alone of all the household was aware of that. He would depict the scene to her, and fill it in with what details he chose. Then, when the news of the wreck was made known on the following day, she would believe every detail of her vision, because of the truth of the main fact.

Placing his lips near to her ear, he whispered so as not to startle her—

“The sea is very calm, Nora.”

“Yes,” she replied, in a passive voice of acquiescence.

“Not a cloud in the sky, and the sunshine floods down on the water. Do you see anything but the sky and the sunshine on the sea?”

"I—I don't know. I think there is something hidden by a mist."

"It is a steamer—the *Lagos*. You see it now?"

"Yes; I see it now, steaming along."

"It is quite close."

"Yes."

"And you can see the people on deck. You can see Joe among the other passengers. He is laughing and joking with that beautiful woman there; he looks as if he is in love with her."

"Yes; he is in love with her—I can see he is in love with her."

"And not with you?"

"No; not with me—not with me."

Her words were plaintive and melancholy, like a wail of the wind about the eaves, as she noted this detail of the picture which, under Michael's artful suggestion, she could see as plain as an actual reality before her. But the man whose words had thus taken possession of her inner vision was merely paving the way for a more vivid and terrible impression.

"They are steaming right on to a sunken rock!" he said quickly. Then, seeing that

she was about to scream frantically to them to change their course, he added, "You cannot call out. See, the ship strikes! You hear the crash; you see her stagger and reel. All is confusion among the passengers. There is Joe rushing about the deck. The ship is slowly sinking. The sailors get the boats out. Joe's face is very pale. He snatches a life-belt from a woman, and makes a rush for the boat that is lowered."

"Coward!" cried Nora, in an agony of indignation, as she stood with clenched hands and fixed eyes gazing at the vision.

Michael went on unfolding the picture before her eyes.

"He is hurled back by the sailors. The ship is rapidly sinking, but the women and children push off in the boats, all except the beautiful woman who is endeavouring to put courage into Joe. Listen! She is saying, 'Joe, let us face death together if we must; it is but a moment, and then we shall be together always.' And you hear Joe's reply—a *curse*. The captain on the bridge calls out, 'Make haste! for your lives! Get clear every one—she's going down!' There is a rush for

the last small boat. Joe gets into it, but the woman is left on deck. See, the boat pushes off—the remaining sailors receive the word, and jump overboard to get clear of the sinking ship, but the woman remains, and stands by the captain on the bridge—why? You know why surely?”

“Because she would sooner die with a brave Englishman than live with a coward!” said Nora, fiercely, as her fixed eyes flashed in the starlight.

“See, they go down,” continued Michael; “the water closes over, and the seabird flits above the spot with a plaintive cry. The boats creep slowly over the ocean; the boat in which Joe has gained a place may reach the land, which is nowhere in sight. But you do not wish to follow it—you are not sufficiently interested in a coward, are you?”

“I detest a coward above all things.”

“Come—you are going to bed. You will sleep, but on waking you will remember what you have seen. You will forget my voice and my presence, and you will remember only your vision and your feelings. Most vividly of all will be impressed upon you the cowardice of

the man who presumes to think you could be his wife."

The greater part of this last speech was whispered in her ear as Michael accompanied her through the hall and a part of the way upstairs. At the last word he left her, well-knowing that she would go to her bed, and awake in the morning without any knowledge of having been out of it, but with the most complete remembrance of what he had caused her to see. Such is the power of hypnotic suggestion in skilful hands, that it turned out according to Michael's expectations.

CHAPTER XXVII

ON the morning after Nora had seen her vision of the shipwreck, she appeared at breakfast looking pale and sad. She spoke but little, and ate still less. It was easy to see that there was something on her mind, but in answer to all inquiries, she simply said she had not slept well.

After breakfast, Michael, being anxious to know how his subtle scheme had succeeded, joined her in the garden, where she was walking aimlessly between the flower-beds, her eyes downcast in painful thought.

"What is the matter, Nora?" he asked, in the voice he used when he wished to appear kind.

She raised her head, and looked him long in the eyes before she replied. At length she said—

"The other evening you explained away

to your own satisfaction, and even to mine, something that I saw as clearly as I see you now."

"Yes," he replied; "such visions are usually the result of self-hypnotism."

He laid great stress upon the word "usually," and Nora caught it up.

"Usually. Then you admit that in some cases they may be pictures of events that are actually taking place?"

Michael assumed the look of one who, having made an admission which places him at a disadvantage, is sorry he cannot withdraw it.

"Well," he said, "it is not for any man to say what is possible and what is impossible. But surely this little psychological matter is not responsible for your troubled look?"

"I have had an extraordinary dream, Michael," she said, in answer to his implied question; "and it has made such a vivid impression upon me that it seems more true and real than anything I see around me here." She swept her hand round at the flowers and trees, which seemed real to her, but not so real as her terrible vision of the night. "I saw

the *Lagos* on the sea ; I saw her strike on a sunken rock, and——”

“Nonsense, Nora !” broke in Michael, sharply. “I have really no patience with you—a mere vision of the night conjured up out of your hopes and fears for Joe.”

“But it was so real, Michael, so vivid. I saw the people rushing about ; I saw Joe——”

“Was he drowned, then ?” asked Michael. “Is it that ?”

“No,” she said, speaking in a slow voice, and turning her head away ; “he was not drowned—he got away in one of the boats.”

Michael did not need to ask any more questions. He saw plainly that his scheme had succeeded, and that Nora’s high opinion of Joe was quite gone, even if her love remained. He would not now bring convincing arguments to bear on the point, as he might have done where there was nothing to gain. He would simply laugh her out of her belief—that is to say, more deeply into it.

“Well, I think it’s all nonsense,” he said “A vision of that kind needs to be verified by facts.”

"And if it *should* chance to be verified by facts?"

"If!" returned Michael. "My dear girl, is it at all likely that the *Lagos* should strike on a sunken rock? It's a most unlikely thing to happen on the face of it."

At this moment they saw Captain Brereton, who was always the first to open and glance through the morning paper, walking rapidly towards them with it in his hand. His face was grave.

"What's the matter, dad?" asked Michael, quickly.

"Bad news, my boy—bad news."

He glanced at Nora, and hesitated to proceed. Nora's colour had fled entirely from her cheeks, and her blue eyes were fixed on him in an agony of suspense.

"What is it, father?" she said, in a voice of suppressed agitation.

Captain Brereton placed his finger on a column of the paper as he replied—

"The *Lagos* is wrecked—struck a sunken rock and foundered."

Nora did not cry out. She turned a dumb, speechless face to Michael, and he met her

hopeless, despairing gaze with one of well-feigned astonishment.

* * * * *

The intelligence that the news of the foundering of the *Lagos* was derived from one of the boats, which, separated from its fellows, had been picked up by a passing vessel, gave a ray of hope to such inmates of Sefton Hall as were anxious for Joe's safety. The additional intelligence that all, or nearly all, the passengers had got clear in the boats before the ship sank, added an additional element of hope, for the chances were that the boat containing Joe would be picked up by one of the many vessels that ply across the Atlantic.

But Nora, though she, of course, joined in the general feeling of hope, was downcast, sad, and almost abject in her despair. Her vision, being now verified by facts in one important particular, claimed her belief in its every detail, and she grieved more over the dastardly cowardice of the man she had loved and waited for with all a girl's first love of worship, than over his possible death. The hatred of Joe which Michael had suggested to her had

passed off, but, believing the truth of her vision, she was possessed by a cold and reasonable contempt for him. Although the fact transpired that the first news of the catastrophe had appeared in the paper of the previous evening, every one except Michael believed that the paper in question had not arrived, and, as Michael said he had called at the paper-shop and made a complaint, no one thought of pursuing the matter any further. Moreover, to guard against possible accidents, Michael strongly advised her to relate her vision to no one, as it would inevitably get into the newspapers—a thing perhaps to be avoided.

That day and night were a time of suspense at Sefton Hall. Captain Brereton, always hopeful, could not bring himself to believe that the son to whose return he had been looking forward for so many years should be lost to him in this way. If Joe had only known what distress he would have saved the people at home by wiring his change of boat, he would undoubtedly have gone to the trouble of doing it.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ON the day following that on which the passengers of the *Truro* were thrown into a state of excitement by Joe's gallant rescue of Rachel, they were kept interested in the affair by the appearance of the latter on deck with something of the air of an invalid about her. A motherly looking old lady, named Mrs. Pentland, had taken her in charge, and, as was natural, Rachel had told her how it was that she was travelling alone in that way. This old lady also knew—and kept to herself—how it had come about that Rachel had tried to drown herself. With an experienced chaperone of this kind there was no fear that she would again attempt anything desperate, for it had very soon been decided between them that a man who had twice saved the life of a beautiful young girl could not remain indifferent to her, especially

as, according to Rachel, he had pledged himself to her not a week before.

Pale and interesting, with Mrs. Pentland's softest shawls about her, Rachel reclined in a deck-chair, and received kind words from every one. Apparently, although there had been a few people about on the deck at the time of her rash plunge into the sea, no one except Joe had actually seen it, and his version of the affair was therefore accepted unhesitatingly. He had conveyed to her at an early opportunity the necessity on her part of telling the same tale, and consequently no suspicions were aroused. Mrs. Pentland had no doubts, because she knew all, and the rest of the passengers had none, because they knew nothing.

This was the state of affairs when Joe, seeing that it would not do to avoid Rachel altogether, nor yet for him to be too much with her, adopted a middle course. When Mrs. Pentland was with her he would linger near her chair, talking to both of them ; but as soon as the well-meaning old lady strove to leave them together, he found some excuse for beating a retreat.

This went on for one whole day. On the next Mrs. Pentland sought a conversation with Joe, in which she adopted a manner of mingled severity and persuasion. She reproached him for acting in a way which she was afraid most people would call dishonourable—for gaining the girl's love, and then abandoning her in so heartless a fashion ; and, finally, for attempting to free himself by pretending to be ignorant of all that had happened between them. It was true he had twice saved the girl's life, but that gave him no right to persist in a course so heartless, so cruel, and, she might even say, foolish and futile, for she had indubitable proof that Rachel's tale was true.

Joe, who up to this point had been staring at her in speechless perplexity, now asked suddenly—

“What proof have you ? I should like to see it. This affair's a mystery to me.”

Mrs. Pentland withdrew from her pocket a small bundle of letters, which she handed to Joe.

“I think there is fairly good proof in those,” she said.

Joe unfolded the letters, and glanced through

them. There were three—the one, as the reader may guess, written by Somers, and purporting to be a fair copy of an answer to Rachel's letter to Joe in Texas; another, signed Joseph Brereton, but written by Somers in New York on the day after the meeting in the pine forest—this letter was full of passionate love; and a third, forged by Jersey Craggs, in answer to the letter which Rachel had sent to the hotel. He read them in silence, and remained for some time in deep thought.

It might be imagined that, at this juncture, Joe would have some suspicion of the trick that had been played by Jersey Craggs, that he would recall the fact that the clever villain had, at their first meeting, mistaken him for a certain Frank Somers, and that he would guess it must be this double of his who had ruined Rachel and then deserted her. Had the circumstances which pointed to these conclusions been carefully weeded out from thousands of other events and laid before him, without doubt he would have solved the mystery without any trouble, but as it was he was hopelessly in the dark. In the hurry and turmoil of the last three months, the existence

of such a person as Frank Somers had slipped his memory, and even if he had recalled it, he was not clever enough at puzzles to find in that person a solution of the mystery. The further limit of his speculations was that Jersey Craggs, who he knew had carried off Rachel's letter among other things, had discovered her whereabouts, and, by means of letters forged from his own handwriting, of which he must have found many examples among the papers stolen from his pocket, had played some infernal trick upon her. But how? There was, he knew, no limit to what an unscrupulous man of iron will like Craggs could do with a young girl like Rachel under such circumstances as these.

"Can it be possible that there is some hypnotic jugglery here?" he asked himself in despair. "If Craggs is at the bottom of this, he must have gained such control over Rachel that these hallucinations may possibly be accounted for."

He glanced at Mrs. Pentland, and looked her straight in the eyes.

"I am absolutely certain that I did not write these letters," he said. "I cannot explain how

Rachel received them, but I am sure they did not come from me. I should like to question her in your presence, so as to convince you that she has most certainly been the victim of some strange hallucination."

"No, you must not do that," returned Mrs. Pentland, firmly. "If you prove that to your own satisfaction, and even convince me, you will never move her from the firm conviction of the truth of her story; and, besides, if she once assures herself that you are determined to persevere in your strange course, she will undoubtedly make a second attempt to take her life."

"But, my dear madam," said Joe, sternly, "this thing is preposterous. I can prove that I was not in New York at the time of the meeting specified in this letter. The girl has been under the influence of some rascally hypnotist, who has either written these letters himself or made her write them."

Mrs. Pentland pursed her lips. "Even supposing that what you say is possible," she said, "there are other proofs. I asked Rachel if there was anything by which she could swear to your identity. At first she said that it was

absurd : if she didn't know you when she saw you, nobody could be certain of anybody. But I said that was not the question ; it would be necessary to convince you in some radical way that it was useless to pretend to be ignorant of the whole thing. At this she thought awhile, and then told me that there were things by which any one might recognize you. One was a knotted joint on your little finger."

Joe held up the little finger which answered to this description.

"According to my theory," said he, "her knowledge of that may have been gleaned yesterday."

"Also," pursued Mrs. Pentland, "a seared scar on each of your thumbs which she noticed. She says you explained that some little time ago, when you were lying unconscious in a fever, a Mexican wizard who found you in that state dipped both your thumbs into boiling oil to drive away the evil spirits."

Joe laughed. "That proves my theory to be correct," he said, holding up his thumbs. "See ! there is no such thing here. Neither of them has a scar of any kind."

Mrs. Pentland looked at them, and when

she saw that what he said was perfectly true, her face fell.

"Anything more?" asked Joe.

"Yes. In climbing a tree to get a flower for her in the pine forest, you tore the nail of one of your fingers. It bled, and she bound it up for you."

Joe displayed his finger-nails. There was no sign of any such accident in any one of them.

"Well," said Mrs. Pentland, now fairly aghast, "this beats my comprehension. I give it up. But I will apologize to you first, as you have made it clear that in two particulars at least she is mistaken."

"In two particulars! Mrs. Pentland, she is mistaken altogether. The whole thing is one huge delusion."

"That may be, but we cannot tell her so. No, no; we must let her think, for a time at least, that there is something to live for. When we get to Liverpool I will take her to my house, and she shall be well looked after, until she can be sent back to her aunt."

"Better still," said Joe; "I will wire to her

aunt as soon as I get ashore, and ask her to come over. That is all we can do."

"That is all, and, in the mean time, temporize with her."

CHAPTER XXIX

JOE'S temporizing, which occupied the two remaining days of the voyage, was a matter not at all to his taste. He felt very sorry for the girl, and, indeed, he realized that, under certain circumstances, his feeling might ripen into a state conducive to weak moments, and in one of those weak moments he might commit himself irrevocably. As this was the last thing on earth that he wished to do, he was not by any means at ease. The remainder of the voyage was one sustained effort to prove to Rachel that he was in danger of falling in love with her, which, considering the fact that this was just what he feared he was doing in reality, made things extremely trying. He knew that if Nora were present it would be different; but as he had not seen her for five years, and as he was by

no means certain that she had not outgrown her sometime affection for him, he was compelled to admit that she was a long way off, and, perhaps, for all he knew, she did not wish him to be true to her. There was no denying it, propinquity was a great factor in the affairs of the heart, and there were even times when he thought that just as a man's duty was that which lay nearest to him, so might his wisest choice of two beautiful women be that which was nearest to him at the moment. Might it not be his best course to marry Rachel and go back to America?

This question was beginning to unsettle his mind when the *Truro* reached Liverpool. When they had left the boat, Joe helped Mrs. Pentland and Rachel on their way by seeing about their luggage and putting them in a cab.

"I should like to call upon you this evening," he said, before they drove off.

Rachel smiled, but Mrs. Pentland knew that his object was to bring her word as to the result of his wire—a matter concerning which Rachel was ignorant.

"I shall be very pleased to see you," said the old lady. "We shall expect you to dinner

at seven. Don't forget the address: 12, Linden Road, Fairfield."

Joe thanked her, and the cab drove off. As he turned and approached another, intending to take it for himself, he was forestalled by a man who stepped hurriedly into the vehicle, calling to the driver as he pointed to the cab that had just driven off—

"Keep that thing in sight!"

In another moment the second cab was speeding after the first, leaving Joe gazing after it in astonishment. But he could do nothing towards elucidating this fresh mystery at present. So he gave it up and went and despatched his wire, having ascertained from Mrs. Pentland, who had gleaned it incidentally from Rachel's story, that she and her aunt had been staying at the Hotel Brunswick. The message was worded as follows:—

"Rachel in safe hands—12 Linden Road Fairfield. Can you come at once? Wire Rolland's Hotel Liverpool."

He signed it "Old Friend," lest Mrs. Cope should misinterpret the thing, and then repaired

to the hotel stated to await a reply. In the course of the afternoon it arrived.

“*Mrs. Cope sailed ‘Campania’ Wednesday.*—MITCHELL.”

“Great Scot!” said Joe, when he read this. “That’s quick work. The *Truro* left on Tuesday and the *Campania* on Wednesday. It didn’t take those New York detectives long to trace Rachel’s movements. And that explains why that fellow followed the cab just now. H’m! let me see—this is Monday. The *Campania* ought to arrive to-day.”

He hastened off to the shipping office as fast as a Liverpool cab could carry him, and inquired what time the *Campania* was expected in.

“About five this afternoon,” replied the clerk.

Joe glanced at his watch. It was half-past four. “I’ll go and meet her,” he said to himself. Hastening out, he hailed another cab and drove off.

When he arrived at the landing stage, there was a crowd of people awaiting the liner’s arrival, and there was one person whom he

recognized. It was the man who had followed the cab containing Mrs. Pentland and Rachel. He was leaning against a pillar apart from the crowd, with his hands thrust deep in his pockets, looking straight before him, evidently deep in meditation.

Always ready for a joke, Joe went up to him.

"Good day, officer," he said by way of greeting.

"Good day, colonel," replied the man, without moving anything of his whole anatomy except his eyes and his mouth.

"You needn't have bothered about following that cab, you know," said Joe, in a bantering tone.

"What cab, colonel?" asked the man, without betraying the slightest interest.

"I could have told you the address if you had asked me," went on Joe.

"What address, colonel?"

"Why, No. 12, Linden Road, Fairfield."

"I guess you have the advantage of me, colonel."

The man's way was so utterly unmoved that Joe was half inclined to think he had made a mistake. Nevertheless he continued.

"It was an interesting little detail that—where the runaway girl disguised herself as an old woman when she left New York in the *Truro*, wasn't it?"

"Is it telling stories you're playing at?" asked the man, scrutinizing Joe with a pair of steady grey eyes. "Descendant of the ancient mariner, tain't likely?" And he straightened himself up from the pillar.

"And it'll be a pity if the girl's aunt doesn't come along by this boat, won't it?" continued Joe.

"I guess you're right there, stranger," said the man, suddenly, seeming to enter into the spirit of the thing. "I ain't the streakiest notion of what you're playin' at; but there—that's my move. It'll be a thousand darned pities if her aunt don't light around by this boat. Go on—your turn. What on earth is the game anyhow?"

"Oh, just a little thought-reading," said Joe, beginning to feel that he had made a huge mistake, and must pass it off in a laugh.

The man reassumed his dreamy pose against the pillar.

"Oh, thought-reading, was you? Why in

creation didn't you tell me? But look here, colonel, you don't mind my saying so, but I don't think your thought-reading's worth a cent. You wouldn't make your living at it, I guess. But I will say this for you—you've got hold of the wrong man. You're tangling me up with some other child jest like me, ain't you now? Say, would you like to hear some real slap-up thought-reading?"

"Certainly," replied Joe, rejoicing that this genial individual did not insist on taking his mistake seriously.

"Very good, colonel," said the man, with the same utter lack of interest that he had displayed at first. "I guess your name's Joe Brereton. You came over in the *Tuscan* the other day, and got drunk the first night you landed. Now you're going back to your home at Sefton Hall, Wilminghurst, Sussex, which you haven't seen for five years. What possessed you to play the fool with that girl in New York, and then lose her so easily? Wal, I s'pose you think Nora's more in your line, eh? Now, Joe, I tell you right here, by your crooked little finger, by them scars on your thumbs, by that there ship tattooed on

your arm, and by that little bit jagged out of your finger-nail, you'll have to marry that gal or there'll be a darned row in the camp."

Joe stared. He had been right, after all. This man had evidently learnt something from Mrs. Pentland.

"It doesn't require a man to pose as a thought-reader to tell me I've got a crooked little finger," said Joe, laughing. "Everybody notices that as soon as they see me. But it was real clever of you to know that I came over by the *Tuscan*. I didn't, as a matter of fact—I came by the *Truro*—but that's a mere verbal error. And, look here, what a wizard you are to know that I've got a scar on each thumb, when I haven't. Buck! buck! how many thumbs do I hold up?"

"Tew."

"Are there any scars on them?"

"Not a scar."

"See any ship tattooed on that arm?"

"No."

"On that arm?"

"No."

"Cast your eye over those finger-nails. Is there a bit jagged out of any one of them?"

"Hum—no; they're all straight wire."

"Then what in creation are you playing at?"

"Wal, jest a little thought-reading, barring the fact that your name is on the *Tuscan* passenger list as large as life."

"That may be, but it's an error; I came by the *Truro*. You won't mind my saying so, but I don't think your thought-reading's worth a cent. If you're no better at anything else than you are at thought-reading, you ought to join Scotland Yard for a living. Well, I will say this for it, you've got hold of the wrong man—as usual. You're fouling me up with some other child very much like me."

The man's attitude throughout was that of one who didn't care one way or the other. Nothing surprised him; nothing even interested him. To Joe's last remark he replied merely—

"P'r'aps; maybe; tain't likely. Got a match?"

Joe gave him one, and he proceeded to probe a back tooth with it.

"Darned thing's been bothering me all day. S'pose I must go and have it weeded out."

Joe laughed, and sauntered away.

"I suppose these detectives get so into the habit of pretending to know nothing about anything that they can't get out of it, even when they've given themselves away," reflected Joe, as he mixed among the crowd.

"Here's a darned rum thing," said the man against the pillar, throwing his match away. "When I tanked him up the other night, I'll swear he had scars on his thumbs, a ship on his arm, and a bit jagged out of his first finger-nail. And how the devil did he get on board the *Truro*? Wal, I guess the only way out of this is that there's two Joe Breretons, or else that I'm dotting off to Sunnyside overland—that's what!"

CHAPTER XXX

WHEN the boat had come in and the passengers were at liberty, Joe at last found Mrs. Cope. She greeted him stiffly and distantly.

"Rachel is with Mrs. Pentland at No. 12, Linden Road, Fairfield," said he, coming to the point at once. "I sent off a wire to you to that effect this afternoon."

"So the detective has just informed me," said she.

"Did he tell you anything else?" asked Joe.

"Yes; several interesting little details which do not reflect credit upon you."

Joe was impressed by her cold and distant manner, and thought that probably she too had gleaned some idea that he had made love to Rachel and then deserted her. He would just ask her one question.

"Do you know what boat I came over in?" he said.

"Yes," she replied; "the *Tuscan*. But for the present I would rather not say anything but just 'How do you do?' and 'Good afternoon!' Mr. Brereton."

Joe heaved a sigh. The further he went the more perplexed he got. The detective had gleaned his correct information from goodness knew where; but as for his incorrect information, which he must have handed on to Mrs. Cope, he could form no theory in regard to it. It was certain that as yet Mrs. Cope had not duly considered the fact that he had wired Rachel's address to her, nor did she know yet that he had saved her niece's life on board the *Truro*. When she knew this, and heard Rachel's story on the top of it, she would probably approach him in a more reasonable frame of mind. He was beginning to think that a mysterious miscarriage of *karma* was taking place; that some other fellow in some other star had been doing blackguard tricks, and he (Joe) was being kicked and pummelled for it. He only hoped that the other fellow was reaping the beneficial results of his (Joe's)

poor efforts in the right direction. He was now taking a grim delight in watching how far this extraordinary injustice of Fate would go. He made no attempt to enlighten Mrs. Cope in any way, but simply put her into a cab, and directed the driver to No. 12, Linden Road. If she preferred to think him a blackguard, let her. He was innocent enough. Why should he trouble ?

On his way back to the hotel, Joe deliberated for some time whether he should go to Mrs. Pentland's house to dinner that evening. It was scarcely necessary as Mrs. Cope herself would tell the old lady everything. He confessed to a desire to see Rachel again ; but the more he thought about the matter, the more he felt that his best course was to leave it where it stood, and let them thrash it out themselves. If he had never let the people at home know that he was coming, and if Nora had given up waiting for him, he could, he thought, marry Rachel, and be happy enough himself in making her happy. But his deep love for Nora, and his feeling that possibly his message saying that he was coming home had meant everything to her, as it had^d to him, finally decided

him to take the first train to Euston, and see how matters stood at Sefton Hall. Having ascertained that the eight-o'clock train for Euston would arrive at its destination between two and three in the morning, he thought it would be a good idea to hire a bicycle at Euston, and ride out into the country in the early hours of the morning. But it would be impossible to secure a bicycle at that hour in London. The only thing to do, then, was to buy his machine in Liverpool and take it down with him. He had intended getting one in London, but he could do it just as well in Liverpool.

No sooner had he reached this conclusion than he took his way to the nearest cycle-shop, and having secured a good wheel, saw it ticketed with his name and address, and ordered it to be sent to Lime Street for the eight-o'clock train for Euston.

On arriving at his hotel, he wrote to Mrs. Pentland excusing himself, as he had made up his mind to proceed homewards without delay. He reminded her that she had his address, and informed her that if his presence was required to throw any further light on the

affair in which he and Rachel seemed to be so mysteriously complicated, he would return to Liverpool at any time she desired, but, for the present, he was anxious to see his people. Having written this, and sent it off by a special messenger, he dined, and afterwards made his way to Lime Street, where he saw that his bicycle was safely on board.

Just as he had seated himself comfortably in the train with a bundle of papers, daily and weekly, to read on the journey, he remembered that he had not wired home to say that he was coming. The day's doings had been such a confused turmoil that it had slipped his memory, and now there was not time ~~before~~ the train started. It did not ~~signify~~ much, he thought; they might guess that five years' knocking about had not altered his careless ways, and they would expect him when they saw him. He could at least wire from Euston, or somewhere on the way up.

Dismissing the matter from his mind as soon as the train started, he turned to his papers, and set about gleaning some knowledge of how the world had wagged since he left New York. He had not proceeded far before

he gave a start of surprise. He had come upon an account of the wreck of the *Lagos*.

"Whew!" he said; "I wired I was sailing by the *Lagos*, and they'll be in a fine state about me when they see my name is not among the rescued. What a fool I was not to correct that message! I must wire from the next station."

He produced a pencil and a piece of paper and began to word the telegram, but suddenly he paused, and, with a frown on his brow, muttered, "They'll think I'm drowned; they won't glean anything from the passenger list except that I may have travelled under another name. H'm—yes—the *Truro* passenger list. They'll certainly find out that I arrived by the *Truro*; but then, they'll find out that I arrived by the *Tuscan* also—which is absurd; so, if they never see or hear of me again, they'll give it up. It's true, if they have mourned for me their sorrow is partly healed. But no; I could not do it—I must go on. I shall be there in the old park by early morning watching the sunrise, as I used to when a boy——"

He paused, and his eyes fixed themselves on

vacancy with a glassy stare. What could he see before him? His lips moved, and formed the name of the girl who loved him more than her life.

“Rachel!”

Meanwhile the train sped on towards London.

CHAPTER XXXI

AT the time that Joe was leaving Liverpool by the train, Mrs. Pentland was sitting in her drawing-room with Mrs. Cope and Rachel.

"I wonder why he would not come?" said Mrs. Pentland, holding Joe's letter in her hand.

"I'm afraid I was rather severe with him," said Mrs. Cope. "I showed him very plainly that I was in possession of certain details."

"Rescuing me from drowning, for instance," put in Rachel, with an evident wish to defend Joe, "and sending you a telegram saying where I was."

"My dear child," said her aunt, "d'you think that because he saves your life in one way, he has a perfect right to spoil it in another? I say he has behaved disgracefully, and you have no right to defend him."

"Then the scars on the thumbs, and the broken finger-nail part of the affair do not mystify you at all?" said Mrs. Pentland.

"Not in the slightest. There can't be two Joe Breretons, both having crooked little fingers, but only one having scars on his thumbs and a broken finger-nail. That's absurd. The simplest explanation is that either one or other of you must be mistaken."

"Then what about his name being on the *Tuscan* passenger list when we know very well that he came by the *Truro*?"

"Some foolish clerk's error," said Mrs. Cope, spreading her hands. "*Truro* and *Tuscan* both begin with a T. The two words must have got mixed up somehow. Surely *you* don't think there are two Joe Breretons, do you?"

"No, no, no!" cried Mrs. Pentland, in her anxiety to lay claim to at least a little common sense. "The whole thing to me is a mystery, but I don't think that."

"I should think not," said Rachel.

"Then," concluded Mrs. Cope, emphatically, "we have to deal with a man who is playing a double part—one *rôle* consisting in ruining a young girl's life, and the other in being as

innocent of the whole thing as a blessed saint. While he is trying to make out that Rachel is subject to an hallucination in thinking that he ever made love to her, we might contend with equal reason that he is subject to an hallucination in believing—if he actually does believe it—that he met her on the *Truro* the first time for more than a year. The man's an arch-pretender and an utter scamp. Don't go, Rachel. Surely you're not so madly in love with the villain that you can't hear him described accurately without rushing away in a huff?"

But Rachel, with flaming cheeks, had left the room, to conceal the burst of tears she could not repress.

"Poor girl, she is unstrung," said her aunt; "and no wonder. But, as I was saying, the man's either an arch-pretender and an utter scamp, or else—or else—— What's this?"

She rose from her seat, and, walking to the sofa where Rachel had been sitting, picked up a crumpled piece of paper. Smoothing it out carefully, she held it up to the light, and read the following words written hurriedly in pencil:—

"MY DARLING RACHEL,

"Will you meet me at half-past eight in the lane at the back of the house? If you are not there at half-past eight I will wait until eleven. Don't disappoint me, dearest; I am dying to fold you in my arms again. Come to me, my sweet.

"JOE."

Mrs. Cope gasped like a dying fish, and turned to the old lady, who, with wide eyes and round mouth, was holding up her hands in astonishment.

"There! What do you make of that, Mrs. Pentland? He's the man who seduced my niece. This proves it, notwithstanding all his pretences."

"Unless perhaps what Mr. Brereton told me was true," said Mrs. Pentland—"that Rachel was under the control of some rascally hypnotist who could make her believe whatever he liked."

"H'm!" remarked Mrs. Cope, sniffing the air, "if there's any rascally hypnotist in the affair, it's Mr. Joseph Brereton himself. At all events, I'll easily settle that matter. I'll keep this appointment myself."

At this point the door opened, and Rachel entered. She looked confused and anxious, and her glance wandered to the sofa where she had been sitting.

"Are you looking for this?" asked her aunt, holding up the pencilled note.

"Yes," replied Rachel, looking rather taken aback. "Will you give it to me?"

"No, Rachel. Now, it's no use flying into a temper. You listen to me. If you keep this appointment, it will end by his persuading you to go away with him, in which case he might make you his wife and he might not. But if, on the other hand, I keep the appointment for you, I will see to it that he makes you his wife without any nonsense, or else gives a very good reason why. I am working for your good, child. I want to see you happy."

"What! With an arch-pretender and an utter scamp?"

"There, there! I did not mean to hurt your feelings. But you know you did not consider mine when you ran away from New York."

Rachel turned away with the tired remark, "Oh, well, auntie, do as you like. If you can clear the matter up, for Heaven's sake do it!"

She dropped into her seat on the sofa with an air of resignation, and said no more.

"It's nearly eight now," said Mrs. Cope. "I'll go at once."

In a few minutes she was making her way into the lane behind the house.

"An arch-pretender and an utter scamp," she said, as she traversed the leafy lane in the twilight, full of indignation and confidence in her own powers. "A consummate villain, if ever there was one. But Rachel and I will reform him."

CHAPTER XXXII

SHE was not far wrong in her estimate of the man she was about to meet. If Frank Somers barely halted short of being a consummate villain and an utter scamp, no one will deny that he was an arch-pretender. He was waiting beneath a tree about midway up the lane, and when he saw an elderly lady, whom he had never seen before in his life, approaching him, he sauntered on to pass her. But when he came within a few paces, and the elderly lady stopped before him with the remark, in a cold, disdainful voice, "Mr. Joseph Brereton, I presume?" he halted also, and stared at her for a moment in surprise. Then, recovering himself, he raised his hat, and replied—

"That is my name, madam. But—er—I am a little at a loss; I cannot see your face distinctly in this light."

"It does not matter about my face, sir," she replied. "If you are going to add to your pretences, and say you do not recognize the aunt of the girl you have treated so shamefully, you will at least listen to what I have to say."

Somers realized that he was in a tight place, and that before he said anything he must get from her how much she knew. Remembering that Joe had known this aunt well, he said in an apologetic tone—

"I really beg your pardon. How foolish of me! But I thought you were in New York."

"Oh, this is too barefaced," she said, with rising indignation, as she recalled her meeting with Joe in the afternoon. "You will tell me next that you do not know my niece Rachel, and that you never treated her in the disgraceful way that you have."

"Indeed, no," replied Somers. "I know your niece Rachel very well. Will you be so kind as to tell me in what way I have treated her disgracefully?"

"For one thing you have tampered with her affections. She has confessed everything ;

so it is no use your assuming such a virtuous air, and denying any knowledge of it. Your movements at L—— are known to me, not only from Rachel, but from an independent source, and your relations with her were of such a nature that to try to run away from her as you did was about as base a thing as a man could be guilty of. And then to pretend that you met her for the first time on board the *Truro*, that you are altogether blameless in the matter, and that she is the victim of some hypnotist!—and to wire her address to me in that hypocritical way to try and get me to believe that you were working for the girl's good instead of for her destruction!”

“My dear Mrs. Cope,” said Somers, “you have been misinformed in most of what you say. I had no intention of running away from Rachel. My intention was to run away *with* her. It was arranged between us to leave New York together in the *Tuscan*, but she failed, and I, thinking she was on board, never discovered until it was too late that she was not there. Then on my arrival yesterday, I wired to her at your hotel asking her to write to an address I gave her here. About an

hour ago I received a reply, signed 'Mitchell,' directing me to this address to which I sent a note just now. As for pretending to be blameless in the matter, or suggesting that Rachel is the victim of some hypnotist, or wiring her address to you when I did not know it, all I can say is that I do not understand you."

Mrs. Cope was taken aback by what she considered a foolish course of lying and pretence. As a matter of fact, what Somers had said was perfectly true. His telegram signed "Joe" had been opened by the proprietor of the hotel, who had consulted Rachel's maid left in charge, and finally wired Rachel's address as ascertained from Joe Brereton's unsigned telegram.

"Are you pretending to be mad or what?" asked Mrs. Cope. "I know for a certainty that you arrived to-day in the *Truro*, notwithstanding your jugglery in getting your name into the passenger list of the *Tuscan*, and yet you tell me now that you sent a message from here yesterday—before you arrived! Then, again, you told me yourself not four hours ago that you had wired me Rachel's address,

and now you declare that you did not know it until an hour ago. Besides, Mrs. Pentland has just received a letter from you, by special messenger, apologizing for not coming to dinner as she asked you, and saying that you were proceeding homewards by the eight-o'clock train. The whole thing is a tissue of lies and trickery from beginning to end, and I fail to see what you think to gain by it."

Strange thoughts flashed through Somers's mind as he listened to this, and he was not long in jumping to a conclusion which to him was not impossible and far-fetched, viz. that there were two Joe Breretons about in Liverpool at the same time, and that Jersey Craggs had really made a mistake in being so sure of the death of the original, who was probably now passing through Liverpool on his return to Sefton Hall. This, to Somers, who alone of the people concerned had a substantial clue in the shape of his own impostorship, was the only possible solution of an affair which to every one else, even to the American clairvoyant whose perplexity now recurred to him, had the aspect of an inexplicable confusion of meaningless lies and contradictions. Having

reached this conclusion with not a little dismay, he felt that first of all he must cut this interview short, lest he should commit himself in some way and be discovered. While he was apparently staggering beneath the lash of Mrs. Cope's tongue, he was in reality reviewing these thoughts rapidly in his mind, and when he spoke, it was to take the only opportunity the situation offered him of getting away.

"Lest you should proceed to further remarks which may be as untrue as they are uncomplimentary," he said, in an offended manner, "I will relieve you of my presence."

With a polite bow he turned and walked rapidly away, leaving Mrs. Cope standing in the lane-way looking after him. It was on her lips to say that she had not meant to offend him, but simply to force him to explain his extraordinary conduct; but that was too long a complication of words to cry out after a retreating listener, and her dignity restrained her. However, she had gleaned from his remarks that, however he might explain his peculiar conduct in the past week, he was now not altogether hopeless as far as marrying

Rachel was concerned. Mrs. Cope knew all about Joe's attachment to Nora O'Neill, for once he had told her about it when she had questioned him on his attitude towards Rachel; and knowing this, she guessed that in his present disgusted state of mind he would probably start off for Sefton Hall, and complicate matters with his first love. Determined to ascertain if her surmise were correct, she returned to the house, and sent a message off post-haste to the detective.

Somers, for his part, continued his way to the end of the lane with the quick steps of a man whose mind is made up. If indeed Joe Brereton were alive, and had gone south by the eight-o'clock train—and there seemed no other explanation of the facts—the game was not necessarily up. If Somers got to Sefton Hall first, he might be able to hold his ground against the real Joe, and denounce him as an impostor faked up by Jersey Craggs. Or, as the issue of this plan was doubtful, it might be possible to secure a mysterious disappearance for him, and take his place. This second plan would work well enough even supposing Joe had already established his quarters at

Sefton Hall ; but Somers, alive to the superior advantages of the man who got there first, resolved to take the next train to London, and proceed thence to Wilminghurst by the speediest mode of locomotion available after midnight.

• He was not long in ascertaining that there was a train that left Lime Street at half-past ten and arrived at Euston at half-past three in the morning. But he could not get a train down to Wilminghurst at that time.

“My best plan is to bike it,” he said. “I shall reach Wilminghurst long before that faked-up impostor who calls himself Joe Brereton. He will probably wait for the first train. But who will provide me with a bike at half-past three in the morning ? I must get one here and take it down with me.”

He found his way to a cab-stand, and asked to be driven to the nearest cycle-shop. When he arrived there the place was closed, but fortunately the proprietor lived over his shop, and was not loath to sell a bicycle at any time of the day or night. But the first thing he asked Somers when he had lighted the gas in his shop was—

"Didn't you get the one we sent to the eight-o'clock train, then?"

"Oh yes," said Somers, seeing in a flash that his double must have thought of exactly the same thing as he had. "But I sold that to a friend who happened to be going by that train, and now I want another one."

"That's pretty quick work," said the man. "Here's the twin machine to it. Same price."

Somers inspected the article, said he would have it, paid the money, took the machine out to the kerb, mounted it, and rode off to catch the 10.30 from Lime Street.

At the station he bought a cyclist's guide, and took a corner seat in a third-class smoker, to study up his way from Euston to Wilminghurst. At 10.30 he went off on his journey towards London, and the detective saw him go.

"H'm," said that imperturbable man, as he watched the train out of the station; "I wonder if this is the chap I tanked up the other night or the chap I met to-day at the landing-stage? I guess there's some big mystery here, and I've got a sorter hazy

notion that there's a deep-sea swindle in it. Anyhow, to-morrow will find John William Bale, detective, somewhere in the neighbourhood of Wilminghurst, sorting these two Joes out on his own account."

CHAPTER XXXIII

ON the night after the events related in the previous chapter, the inmates of Sefton Hall, still in doubt whether Joe had been saved from the wreck, retired to bed early, some to sleep badly, one to toss and moan all night long, and one to smile in his sleep at his own clever wickedness. This one awoke at daybreak, and made up his mind to go out and shoot rabbits—a thing he often did on fine mornings.

When he had dressed he took his gun from the corner of the room where he usually kept it. Opening the breech he found that he had been unsportsmanlike enough to leave the gun loaded. This vexed him rather, as he prided himself he was as precise and correct in his sport as he was in most things. A little slip in the working of a business problem may cause the downfall of a great house; a tiny

screw loose in a vast system of machinery may be the cause of a great catastrophe; and, as it will presently be seen in Michael's case, a trifling piece of carelessness such as that above mentioned may lead to strange consequences. Closing the breech without removing the cartridge, he provided himself with some more ammunition, and went out.

It chanced that in his rounds Michael saw nothing to shoot at until he came to a glade leading through a copse at some little distance from the house, and the something that he then encountered was not a rabbit.

The sun was not yet up when he made his way into the half-overgrown glade that ran through this thickly wooded copse. All was very quiet in the grey light—so quiet that the awakening birds merely twittered, as if fearing to disturb the silence with a bold chorus of song. Michael made his entrance by dewy gateways of hanging boughs into the dimmer shadows of the copse, and so much alone did he feel as he went that he almost spoke his secret thoughts aloud.

A rabbit, frightened by his dog from the left of the copse, crossed an open part of the

glade just before him, but he was not quick enough for the little fugitive, and, moreover, his dog came close upon its heels, and disappeared on the right in a cloud of beech husks and whirling leaves, so that he had not a chance to fire.

Michael reached the centre of the glade, where, in an open space, stood a great birch, spreading its leafy arms over a circular space of dry leaves. By the trunk of this tree he paused a moment, looking down the glade, which continued on through the copse beyond. As he did so he heard sounds as of some one drawing near. Some early morning labourer going to work, he thought, while he casually watched for the man's approach.

But it was no labourer. The approaching figure was seen dimly in the vague shadows of the trees, and Michael knew by the step and dress that he had been mistaken in his guess. The man came out into the clearer light beneath the finger-tips of the spreading birch and stood looking up at the majestic tree. He was clad in grey, and, by the clips on his trousers, looked as if he had been cycling.

As this stranger held his face up in the clearer light to survey the massive foliage of the tree, Michael started and clutched his gun. Unseen, he darted behind the trunk of the tree where the shadows were deepest, and stood stock still for the space of five seconds. In the face of the stranger he had recognized the features of his half-brother Joe, and in the brief space of time that he stood motionless behind the tree-trunk, his mind worked rapidly.

Joe had come back. His name had not been among those in the boat picked up by the incoming vessel, yet there must have been a mistake; he must have been one of them. But why had he not wired on landing? Ah! he wished to surprise everybody. But this would upset all his, Michael's, plans. If Joe had planned a surprise, as was evident, it was most probable that he had not disclosed himself to any one as yet. He, Michael, alone knew of his existence in the neighbourhood, and if he suddenly ceased to exist, it was probable that no one in England would be any wiser.

Such things as these coursed like lightning through Michael's brain as he stood clutching

his gun in the shadows. Then stealthily he peered round the tree-trunk. The stranger was still standing looking up into the tree, evidently watching the movements of a squirrel. Michael raised his gun. There was silence till a loud report rang through the copse, and soon afterwards Michael's dog appeared on the scene, and sniffed round the body of a man who had ceased to move among the dry leaves.

Michael sternly ordered the dog away, and setting down his gun, dragged the body out of the open into the thick of the trees. There he paused and considered a moment. Yes; there was a deep, disused well in a lower part of the copse. He remembered its position, and went in search of it. Finding the hollow where the blue bells grew in profusion, he made his way to a spot where a weeping willow, leaning over, drooped its long curtain of tendrils nearly to the ground. Within this curtain he came upon the old well, roughly boarded up, into which he and Joe as boys had often dropped small stones to hear the tinkling musical response from below.

With comparative ease he removed two of the broad planks which covered the well and

looked in. It was all as dark as night. Michael took a stone and dropped it into the darkness. Several seconds elapsed before the response came. It was deep, very deep—quite deep enough to hide all traces of this foul crime.

Michael returned, and dragged the body to the spot; then he securely weighted it with a large stone attached with an old rope he found near by. In doing this he noticed two holes in the bloodstained vest where the contents of the gun had entered. One was that made by the charge of shot at short range, and the other, just alongside of it, had cut a circular piece of cloth clean out, leaving a round hole as large as a sixpence. This puzzled Michael for the moment, and he searched in vain for the aperture of its exit. Whatever the substance might be, it was still in the body; but the work in hand was too pressing to pause and reflect over details. The circumstance did not worry him, and when he had closed down the thick planks over the dark, terrible truth that lay at the bottom of that well, and had walked back by the way he had come, to cover up the traces of his work, he had forgotten all about that

clean circular hole in the murdered man's vest—for a time, until Fate should remind him of it.

At breakfast that morning Captain Brereton remarked—

“I heard a shot down in the copse early this morning. It was you, I suppose, Michael, my lad?”

“Yes,” said Michael, raising a cup of coffee to his lips; “it was the only rabbit I could get a shot at the whole morning, and him I missed.”

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CHAPTER XXXIV

IN the morning paper there was news that three of the boats of the *Lagos* had been picked up with their full number of passengers safe and well. The names were not given, but there seemed reasonable ground for hope that, after all, Joe would return to Sefton Hall not much the worse for this untimely shipwreck. Towards evening hope ran high, but Nora seemed slow to share it to the full. She was as dejected as ever, and it was only when Michael, who seemed to have gained some strong influence over her in the past two days, tried to interest her, that she brightened up in any degree. He employed many methods of drawing her away from her gloomy regrets, which were less for Joe's possible danger than for his imagined cowardice; and in the evening, when they were sitting discussing all the possible grounds for hope

they could discover or invent, an opportunity occurred which Michael at once took advantage of, both for the purpose of changing the subject and dragging Nora's thoughts away from her trouble. It arose in this way.

Captain Brereton entered the drawing-room with a telegram in his hand.

"I have just received a wire from Mrs. Armstrong," he said.

"Oh, about that seal of mine, I suppose?" said Michael.

"Yes. Where do you think it was hidden?"

"Don't tell us," said Michael, quickly. "Here, Nora, wake up! We'll give you one more chance in the thought-reading business. Come, have another try."

Mrs. Brereton looked up from her knitting, and echoed Michael's request for another attempt to locate the hiding-place of the seal. The fair-haired girl and her brother, who had just called in, clamoured enthusiastically for a repetition of the experiment of a previous evening.

Captain Brereton laughed. "Well," he said, "none but Mrs. Armstrong knew where it was

the other night, but now it would puzzle even her to find it."

He held the telegram away from Mrs. Brereton, who was trying to get a look at it.

"Never mind," said Michael, who was placing the bandage over Nora's eyes, "let her try; she can but fail. Besides," he added, with a laugh, "if the seal's lost, I'm willing to pay a handsome fee for its recovery. Madame Nora will now find the seal."

"I'll do my best," said Nora, with a melancholy smile, as Michael placed in her hand the little gold ring which had been detached from the seal to serve as a link between herself and the hidden object.

In the silence that followed, Captain Brereton took a letter from his pocket and handed it to Michael. It was from Dr. L——, in answer to their inquiry on the important point which they had discussed several evenings before, and it stated very emphatically that in every case where an object was accurately described or located, it was perfectly certain that the facts were derived by thought-reading from some person or persons present, and not by what is called clairvoyance.

Michael glanced it through, and nodded to his father, who whispered to him—

“Then it’s perfectly certain that it’s impossible for Nora to locate this seal, for how can any one present know where it is now? Look!” And he handed him the telegram.

When Michael had read it, there was one person in the room who knew exactly where that seal was, and that person was Michael. The words ran—

“Sorry forgot about seal. I dropped it into Michael’s gun.”

By a quick train of thought it flashed vividly into Michael’s mind that the seal must have been in his gun when he fired that only shot in the morning, and that the circular hole in the murdered man’s vest marked the spot where it had entered his body. Then what was possibly its exact position in the body at the bottom of the well beneath the weeping willow seemed burnt in with fire upon his brain, and it was owing to this vivid impression of the seal embedded in flesh that the mental image of Joe was absent from his mind’s eye.

At that moment, even while he gazed blankly at the paper before him, Nora spoke.

"I see it," she said—"at the bottom of a deep, dark well!"

The telegram fluttered from Michael's hands to the floor; and Captain Brereton, stooping to pick it up, did not notice the pale set look on Michael's face as Nora continued—

"Yes; it is the old well underneath the willow down in the hollow in the copse."

"Well done!" cried Michael, who had now recovered his composure. "This is a capital piece of thought-reading guesswork. Look here!" He read out the telegram; then proceeded, "My gun was loaded when Mrs. Armstrong dropped the seal into it, and it may have got stuck in the end of the cartridge. Anyhow, I went out this morning to shoot rabbits. I fired one shot, and when I fired it, I was standing alongside of that very willow over the well in the hollow. This came into my mind as soon as dad handed me this telegram to read. Of course the seal went with the charge in the direction of the rabbit, which was just disappearing over a ridge as I fired; but it shows how guesswork can come

into thought-reading. Nora *saw* the well from my mind, and *guessed* the seal was in it."

"Did you look down the well?" asked the sharp-witted brother of the fair-haired girl.

"Yes; I think I did," replied Michael, quietly.

"Then perhaps something rolled out of your gun into the well, and you wondered what it was. Then just now when you read the wire, you sub-consciously associated that something with the seal, and Miss O'Neill read your thought."

"Good," said Captain Brereton. "That accords with your explanation about the book in the shelf, Michael. You remember? Sub-conscious activity of the brain!"

"Perhaps," said Michael, doubtfully. "But I cannot recall anything dropping into the well."

"Neither could I about the name of the book," returned his father.

"It seemed very distinct," said Nora. "I feel certain it's in that well. The vision of the well was as clear as day, and the seal down in the darkness seemed embedded in flesh. You must have hit the rabbit, and then

perhaps afterwards it crawled to the well in a dying condition and fell in."

"That solution would point to clairvoyance rather than thought-reading," said Captain Brereton; "for Michael could not have observed that without remembering it."

"Well, why not clairvoyance?" asked Nora. "You know as well as I do, Michael, that there *are* instances for which thought-reading will not account."

She spoke with meaning emphasis, and the glance she exchanged with Michael brought sharply to his mind the instance to which she had referred in particular. He saw he was in a tight position, for what with his professed belief in Nora's vision of the shipwreck, and his father's quick perception that here was possibly a chance of disproving Dr. L——'s emphatic assertion, and claiming a final victory over Michael on the point they had so often contested in argument, he saw but one end to it all—an end which he suspected was inevitable. It would not be any help to him to adopt the sharp-witted young man's theory of sub-conscious activity of the brain: the end would be the same.

In a feeble attempt to avert it he said, with the air of a man who is willing to change the subject—

“Well, anyhow the seal’s lost, wherever it is.”

Then what he had dreaded happened naturally enough. It was Captain Brereton who spoke laughingly and in boisterous tones.

“Ho, ho! my lad; you can’t get off as easily as that. I’d give five hundred pounds to prove a case of genuine clairvoyance. That well shall be drained, sir, first thing to-morrow; and, hang me, Nora, my girl, if you’ve led me astray, I’ll never say ‘clairvoyant’ again. But, mind, all of you, we must keep this a dead secret; for, if it comes to nothing, we might get severely laughed at. Eh, yes; I’ll set a watch by that well from this minute, to guard against accidents.” And he went to appoint a guard forthwith.

Michael returned his father’s bantering anticipation of triumph with a sickly smile, and shrugged his shoulders in acquiescence. Then, when no one was looking, he turned away to wipe his brow, where great beads of perspiration had suddenly appeared.

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On the following morning, towards noon, Mrs. Brereton and Nora were sitting together in the morning-room, which overlooked the park, when Captain Brereton came in, and, seating himself on the edge of the table, laughed while he fanned himself with his hat.

"The men are getting on capitally," he said; "they're emptying it with a windlass and buckets. I thought that would be the shortest way in the long run."

"Have they found the seal yet, I wonder?" said Nora, with a brave effort to show interest.

"Oh, they'll come down on to it all in good time," replied the captain, cheerfully; "they've nearly got to the bottom, and I left them hard at it. I have given them instructions to look out for a dead rabbit. I'll go down to them again after lunch; but it's frightfully hot work carrying buckets of water up out of that hollow, I tell you. Where's Michael?"

"I haven't seen him since breakfast," replied Mrs. Brereton, looking up from her needle-work. "Hasn't he been down at the well?"

"No fear; Michael takes these things to heart in a wonderful way. It's a very poor

revenge to beat Michael in an argument ; it upsets him for days. Didn't you see how taken aback he was when he saw my determination to have the well drained ? I expect he's gone off by himself somewhere to plot out a feasible explanation of the thing according to his own way of thinking. I imagine I can see him. Ha ! ha ! ha ! ”

“ Michael's not easily beaten in anything,” said Mrs. Brereton, looking proud of the fact.

“ You mean he doesn't take a beating easily,” retorted the captain, still in his merry mood. Then his face softened and saddened into a gentle anxiety as he said, after a pause, “ Dear, dear, it's very strange that Joe's name was not among the list of passengers by the *Lagos*. If he travelled under another name, intending to surprise us, why send the telegram ? ”

“ And even if he did travel under another name,” put in Mrs. Brereton, “ one would think that, if he was in one of the boats that have been picked up, he would surely give his real name, if only for our peace of mind.”

“ Perhaps his way of surprising us,” said Nora, rather coldly, from her seat on the window-step, “ was to wire that he was coming

by the *Lagos*, and then come by some other boat."

The captain raised his eyebrows and stroked his short grey beard.

"I'd forgive him even for doing that," he said, "so long as the dear boy's safe and sound."

"I'm afraid it's too good to be true," said Nora, sadly. "Perhaps he had some reason for concealing his real name when he was picked up—if he has been picked up." She said no more, but in her heart she added, "He will leave his cowardice with the false name, and come home to us as brave Joe Brereton." Nora's bitterness was almost greater than she could bear.

"What possible motive could Joe have for concealing his real name, child?" said the captain, severely.

"None whatever," said a cheery voice from the door; and Joe himself entered the room, hat in hand, and his honest, handsome face all over smiles.

Captain Brereton started up with a cry of joy, and, running to his son, placed both hands on his shoulders, and looked him in the face.

Mrs. Brereton turned in her chair, and gave a little terrified cry which had a conventional ring of welcome in it. And Nora, who had started up with a glad word at first sight of him, held shyly back, with a look unmistakably like scorn in her deep blue eyes. When her turn came, she greeted him with as much warmth as she felt; then, scarcely knowing her feelings, left the room hurriedly, saying that she would run and fetch Michael.

CHAPTER XXXV

HAD Joe been asked whether he had heard of the wreck of the *Lagos* before reaching London, he would scarcely have known how to answer, for, if he had admitted that he had, the next question obviously would be, "Then why did you not wire us that you were safe and well?" And this was a question involving matters in regard to which he had determined to say nothing. The facts were these :

No sooner had he begun to write the message in the train, two days before, than a peculiar thing happened to him. A strange feeling of silence and quiet came over him. His mind and will became as it were focussed to a point, and his eyes fixed their gaze upon the opposite wall of the apartment, or apparently upon a point many miles beyond it. Then, to his mind's eye, a strange vision was

unfolded. He saw Rachel at an open window embowered in vines. She was standing looking out into the night, with her hands resting before her on the window-sill. Suddenly she seemed to see him, and held her arms out imploringly. Then the voice came to him as if from far away—

“Joe, Joe! You are going to your death and mine! Come back while there is time!”

As Rachel’s eyes gazed into his, Joe felt an overmastering longing to return to her. It was not the longing of love, although there was in it a great feeling of being loved. It was chiefly a great desire to see Rachel and talk with her.

The vision faded. Joe rose from his seat, shook himself, and paced up and down the compartment, which had no other occupants.

“Bah!” he said at last. “Who’s got hallucinations now, I should like to know? Why should I go back? If I do, I may commit myself, and then it will be all up between Nora and me. I’ll send this telegram to the dad, and that will go a long way towards deciding matters; at all events, it will mean that I shall, at all costs, remain true to Nora.”

He sat down again, and, dismissing his vision from his mind, proceeded to word the message. But his thoughts were so disturbed that it took him nearly half an hour to do it. At last, after long pauses, during which his thoughts wandered to Rachel, it was complete and satisfactory, and only required to be sent off from the next station.

The train was already slackening down, when, as Joe was meditating in a half-abstracted way, he experienced the same sensations as before, and the vision again unfolded itself before his inner eye. This time the voice was more distinct and clear, as if the words had been called from the darkness of the night by some one twenty or thirty yards away.

"Joe, Joe! You are going to your death and mine! Come back while there is time!"

The same overmastering impulse to return to Rachel seized upon him, but he struggled with it and forced it down, telling himself that this was a passing aberration of heart, and he must not waver in his determination to be true to Nora. So fierce was this struggle within him that he forgot all about his telegram; and

when, after a wait of a few minutes, the train passed out of the station again, he was aware that he held something crushed in his hand. It was the piece of paper on which he had written his message.

Again he paced up and down the compartment as the train sped on.

"You are going to your death and mine!" he said, repeating the words he had heard in his strange waking dream. Again and again he uttered these words as he strode to and fro, mentally weighing them against his practical common sense. At last he threw himself into his corner seat again, and lighted a fresh cigar.

"This is some passing madness," he said. "It's catching, apparently. Rachel has had it; now I've got it. But I guess I'm sane enough in a general way to sit tight in this train till I get to Euston."

He smoothed out the telegram, wrote it afresh on another piece of paper, and then tried to interest himself once more in the news of the day. By dint of great application he succeeded in this, but he could not get away from his intense longing to see Rachel, to

speak to her, to sit with her, and upbraid her for her impulsive waywardness, even, perhaps, to hold her hand in his and kiss her for the first and last time.

The train was now approaching Crewe, where Joe knew it would wait long enough to enable him to despatch his telegram. Suddenly the same strange feeling came to him as before, enveloping him in great silence. Then the door near which he was sitting opened, swung back on its hinges, and was drawn sharply to again with a bang.

While he was still wondering at this, he felt two soft arms steal round his neck, and a warm cheek laid against his. In another moment a pair of quivering lips stole to his, and pressed them with a lingering kiss. It thrilled him, and, scarcely knowing what he was doing, he returned it. Then, although he could see nothing but empty air before him, he folded his arms round a soft, yielding form, and pressed it close to him. Again Rachel's voice spoke, coming from the lips that had been pressed to his—

“Joe, Joe! You are going to your death and mine! Come back while there is time!”



" In another moment a pair of quivering lips stole to his."

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The warm lips were pressed a second time to his. The soft arms were removed from his neck, and the form of Rachel seemed to melt out of his embrace. Again the door opened, and, as it was closed with a bang, Joe started up from his seat with clenched hands and set face.

"My God!" he said, "this is a warning, or it is madness. Whichever it is, I will go back."

He glanced down at the written message lying on the cushioned seat. Then, realizing that, if he went back, he might never return to Sefton Hall, he took it up, and deliberately tore it to fragments, which he scattered through the window.

When the train drew up at Crewe he alighted, got his luggage and bicycle out, and booked his passage back to Liverpool. He took the first available train, and reached Lime Street again within a few minutes of one o'clock in the morning. He could not go to Mrs. Pentland's house at that time, so he went to an hotel.

In the morning, still full of a great desire to see Rachel, he made his way to No. 12,

Linden Road, and arrived there at ten o'clock. Mrs. Pentland greeted him with surprise, and in a manner that might be described as tentative, for, notwithstanding Mrs. Cope, she had an instinctive trust in him. All the things which pointed to the conclusion that he was an abandoned villain were to Mrs. Pentland an unfathomable mystery, and when she had given them that name, she felt that she had smoothed things out, and explained the whole affair.

"How is Rachel?" were almost the first words that Joe spoke.

"Oh," replied Mrs. Pentland, "she and her aunt have gone to London by the 9.45 train. You see, when you left Mrs. Cope last night, she sent a message to the detective she had been employing to ascertain if you left for London at once. She soon learned from him that you went by the half-past ten train for Euston."

"He was wrong there," said Joe. "I left by the eight o'clock, changed my mind at Crewe, and arrived in Liverpool again at a quarter to one."

"But," said Mrs. Pentland, "did you not send a note to Rachel asking her to meet you

in the lane at half-past eight, and did you not meet Mrs. Cope instead? How, then, could you have left by the eight-o'clock train?"

"I sent no such note to Rachel," said Joe, and there was evident honesty and truth in the puzzled expression of his face, "nor have I seen Mrs. Cope since yesterday afternoon."

Mrs. Pentland stared, wide-eyed. "Well, I can't make it out," she said. "Somebody's a victim to hallucinations. Whether it's you, or Mrs. Cope, or Rachel, or myself, or all of us, I shouldn't like to say. Anyhow, Rachel went off in a kind of trance last night when she was sitting with us. The doctor said it was catalepsy, or something of the kind, and her aunt has taken her to London to see a specialist."

"What did she say when she was in the trance?" asked Joe, coupling this piece of information with his vision of the night before.

"She said nothing. Her eyes were wide open, and her body was all rigid. She did not seem to be breathing. We thought she was dead, or dying, and so sent for the doctor, but before he arrived she came to, and after

a little wine was herself again. But I shall never forget it. It was horrible!"

"Did she say anything after she came round?" asked Joe.

"She only said she seemed to have been away somewhere, but her thoughts were confused, and we could not get much out of her. This morning she was very quiet, and scarcely spoke a word except to say good-bye."

"Could you tell me where I might possibly find them in town?" asked Joe.

Mrs. Pentland shook her head. "I think Mrs. Cope has some idea of going straight on to your home in Sussex," she said; "she thinks you are there at the present moment. She said last night that she hadn't done with you yet—those were her words, Mr. Brereton. I do not feel towards you as she does. At one time I think that what you say about hallucinations on Rachel's part is the only explanation of the mystery. At other times I do not know what to think."

"If it is a case of hallucinations it seems to me that each and all of us are equally subject to the same form of delusion. If Rachel met me in New York when I was not

there, Mrs. Cope has done exactly the same thing ; she says she met me in Liverpool last night at a time when I was well on my way south. It strikes me this is what the psychical researchers would call a new form of collective hallucination, or else—— But that is absurd.”

“ What is absurd ? ”

“ Why, that I have a double who knows my business, thinks my thoughts, and is practically myself to all intents and purposes, except for the one important fact that he is in love with Rachel, and I—— ”

“ And you ? ”

“ Well, I hardly know my feelings towards her. I must find her, and then perhaps I shall know. I will search the visitors’ lists of the most likely hotels near Euston, and see if I can find them.”

Soon afterwards Joe took his leave, and caught the first train for Euston. Arriving there late in the afternoon, he spent the rest of the day in searching the visitors’ lists of the hotels, for he was particularly anxious to find Mrs. Cope, and prevent her going to Sefton Hall in search of him. If he had to confront her, and, while denying her accusations, decide

finally what he intended to do in regard to Rachel, he thought he would sooner do it before either he or she reached his home. But in the morning he took himself to task with sober reason, and asked himself why he should be forced by any one or anything into marrying Rachel? He was in a more practical mood now, and saw things in a clearer light. The intense longing to see Rachel had passed away, and he resolved to go home, and leave the issue in the hands of Providence.

Accordingly, he took train for Wilminghurst, and arrived about noon in time to surprise every one in the manner described in the last chapter.

CHAPTER XXXVI

WHEN Nora had rushed out of the room in her confusion of feeling at Joe's arrival, the captain, who had worked off his first joy in slapping his son on the back and punching him in the chest to see if he was really there, wiped a furtive tear from his eye, and remarked—

"Well, now, my son, tell us all about it. Your mother and I—all of us, in fact—have been in a fine state about you. Come; sit down, and tell us all about it."

"All about what?" asked Joe, looking round at the door through which Nora had just disappeared.

"About what? Why, the shipwreck, of course."

"Oh, the shipwreck! My dear old dad, I haven't been shipwrecked."

The captain and Mrs. Brereton looked at one another in mystification.

"The *Lagos*," said the captain, slowly, his eyes seeking explanation in Joe's face—"the *Lagos* was wrecked."

"And we had your telegram saying you were coming by the *Lagos*," added Mrs. Brereton.

"Oh," said Joe, reproaching himself when he saw what anxiety they had suffered, "I am so sorry! I missed the *Lagos*, and came by the next boat."

"Sorry!" echoed the captain, in his heartiest voice. "I'm very glad you didn't come by the *Lagos*. There, there! We forgive you, Joe; we're only too glad to see you back again safe and sound."

Nora, whose object in getting away had been rather to think quietly over what attitude she should adopt towards Joe, than to search for Michael, went straight to the summer-house to look for him, and, finding no one there, sat down to think gloomy thoughts. But it so chanced that, soon after she went out, Michael was making his way towards the house. He had thought out what course *he*

should pursue : he would brazen it out, trusting to his cleverness ; for now that he had put Joe out of the way as he thought, it would be foolish to make a bolt for America or Australia. With his mind made up, therefore, for better or for worse, he entered the house, and naturally bent his steps towards the morning-room, where he expected to find Nora.

His ear caught only the last three words of the captain's remark, as set down above, while crossing the hall. The next moment, when he entered the room, he staggered back against the door with a choking gasp, and remained gazing at Joe with fear written plainly upon his haggard face and in his starting eyes.

"Hello, old chap!" cried Joe, advancing towards him, with outstretched hand and his face all over smiles.

But Michael hung back with his hand to his throat, staring at him like one bereft of his senses.

"Come, I say, Mike ; I'm not a ghost," cried Joe, heartily, grasping his hand, for he could not be lean and sour with any one. "What's the matter ?"

"Nothing—nothing," gasped Michael, recovering himself a little. "I haven't felt well for days, and the pleasure of seeing you when we had almost given you up for dead seemed to stagger me for a moment; but it's nothing. Right glad to see you alive and well, old man," he concluded, with a ghastly smile of welcome.

"Come and sit down, old boy," said Joe, kindly, leading Michael to a seat, for he had come back to be friends with his half-brother; "you don't look at all well. I gave you a Yankee start, eh? Didn't Nora tell you I was here?"

"I haven't seen her," said Michael.

"She's gone out to look for you. I'll go and find her, and tell her you're here. Perhaps she's searching about for you. I've hardly exchanged a word with her yet."

"Yes, my boy, run and find her," said Captain Brereton; and as Michael's mother was anxiously worrying after him with wine and biscuits, Joe darted out over the window-step to look for Nora.

Learning from one of the servants whom he met that she had seen Nora go down

towards the summer-house, Joe hurried thither, and found her sitting there in gloomy distress.

"Nora," he cried in dismay, as he stood before her, "why are you like this? Are you not glad I have come home?"

She looked up at him, and, though she was glad in a sense that he had escaped the shipwreck, her eyes flashed the scorn which possessed her, for she believed that he had acted the part of a coward. But, like a woman, she attacked him on a matter which was not the real point at issue.

"When we parted years ago," she said, "you asked me to wait for you, and you spoke to me in a way that led me to suppose that I should always be in your thoughts. I suppose I have been so much in your thoughts that there was no need for you to come home until I had ceased to think of you."

Joe looked stunned. "I will tell you some day," he said, "why I stayed away until I could stay away no longer. But all I say now is that you have always been in my thoughts, and I have been as true as I promised. Is it that you have changed? Tell me—have you grown to love some one else?"

"Would to Heaven that I had!" said Nora, turning her face away.

"What do you mean? I cannot understand you. I will tell you, then, why I have stayed away all these years."

"It is not that," she cried, starting up and facing him with her Irish eyes full of fiery scorn. "I will tell you why I am like this. The night before we had the news of the wreck of the *Lagos* I dreamed about it, or saw the whole thing in a vision. Yes, you may smile; I know you will pooh-pooh my vision away, but I feel that, as sure as I see you now, I saw all that happened."

"Very well, Nora," said Joe, curious to get at the cause of her strange behaviour; "I will not interrupt you. Tell me what you saw."

Then she told him her vision: told him that she had seen his cowardly behaviour, which had left in her heart a feeling of contempt where love had been; told him about the woman—his wife, she supposed—who had appealed to him to show at least some signs of manhood; indeed, she told him everything she had seen, from the moment the ship struck until he fought his way into the last boat,

leaving the woman behind to go down with the ship.

“And you call yourself a man!” she concluded fiercely, for his eyes were twinkling with merriment. “I call you a coward. Let me pass!”

CHAPTER XXXVII

JOE knew that Nora had always been a visionary creature, and he understood that she was fully convinced of the truth of her vision, especially as it had occurred on the night before the news of the catastrophe had reached them. He stepped aside with a bow, knowing that even while she flashed a withering look of unutterable scorn upon him, he was still master of the situation.

"Nora!" he called gently, as she was walking away.

She paused, and turned as he advanced slowly towards her.

"Well?" she said, frowning.

"I do not deny the main points of what you have told me," he said quietly, with a very successful effort at gravity of countenance. "That snatching of the life-belt from the woman; that dastardly attempt to enter the

first boat before the women and children ; that unmanly response to—er—I think you said, my *wife's* brave words ; that last frantic rush for the last boat, leaving her to die with the captain—all these cowardly acts I see it would be useless for me to deny, but there is one little detail in which you are hardly correct, Nora : I did intend coming by the *Lagos*, but fortunately I missed it, and came by the *Truro*. But, there, that's a very slight discrepancy. What you saw, of course, was a vision of what I would have done if I had been on the *Lagos* when she struck."

Nora looked at him for a moment. Then she turned very pale, as love and pain surged up in her heart together. She had wronged him, and her atonement was as impulsive as her denunciation had been. She ran towards him with her arms held out.

"Joe, is it true?" she cried.

"Quite true. And you believed this thing of me on the strength of a silly dream?"

"Joe, don't look at me like that! I saw it so plainly. It was all so real, I couldn't help believing it."

"What? Couldn't help believing that I

snatched a belt from a woman—that I pushed and fought to be first into the boat—that I—— Faugh!” He was angry now.

“Joe,” she pleaded, with a moan of pain, “do not be angry with me!” Then her words came quickly. “Listen, Joe. It was on the night before any of us had the news of the wreck, but I did not believe my vision was true until next morning, when I saw that the wreck of the *Lagos* was a fact. Then I thought if that part of the vision was true, the rest must be. Oh, Joe dear, don’t frown at me! I loved you all the time, I did; and that vile dream nearly drove me mad. But I am happy again now I know it was not true. I will not ask you any more to forgive me. It is enough to know that you are my hero, as you always have been ever since you went away—and stayed away. Yes, I know I am crying; and now I’ll go away by myself, and cry it out.”

“No, you won’t!” said Joe; and in an instant she was in his arms. “You’ll do all the crying you’ve got to do here. Nora, Nora! How could I be harsh to you? How could I be angry with you?”

Her head sank upon his breast, and whether she cried or not, she sobbed for joy that her vision had played her false; that her Joe was no coward, but a strong man, whose arms were now around her; that he had come back safe and sound. All this feeling towards him had been held back by her scorn for the past two days, and now, being liberated, it swept her soul to Joe in a love that was beyond the power of words to express. But, perhaps, as she lifted her now radiant face to his, and their lips met in the first sweet, mingling kiss of love, it was told in music on their heart-strings; perhaps her eyes, now sparkling like the summer sea, so deep, so blue, so irresistible, flashed the splendour of it into the depths of his soul.

Presently she held her head back, and, looking at him with eyes that were not quite sure, she asked—

“Joe, what about the other woman?”

He laughed. “There is no other woman,” he said; “you, darling, are the same woman, and the other woman.”

Then the full tide of love sent another wave upon the golden shore whose grains of sand

are human hearts, and it seemed to these two, as they kissed again, that a throb of the immense ocean of joyous life had passed through them.

Joe led Nora to the seat in the summer-house, and there they unburdened their hearts. Too soon the lunch-bell rang, and they rose and went up to the house. As they went, Nora said meditatively—

“Joe, visions are such a mixture of truth and falsehood, that we can never steer by them. I’ll never let them into my daily life again.”

When they reached the dining-room, the others were assembled there waiting.

“Well, Nora, my girl,” said Captain Brereton, as they entered the room, “you’re not sorry Joe’s come home—eh?”

For answer she rushed to him with laughing cheeks, all crimson, and, flinging both arms round his neck, kissed him again and again.

The Irish nature is not difficult to interpret when it is roused to good or evil, love or hate, and Michael had no need of more than two eyes to see that his dexterously worked scheme had failed. His faked vision and his desperate

crime were all unavailing. One look into Nora's face dispelled his hopes of winning either her or the fortune which he alone knew was to come to her. Then, as his eyes rested with a perplexed look upon Joe, he asked himself seriously, for the twentieth time, whether that crime of his had been a mere hallucination, a symptom of approaching mental disorder which he knew had cropped out in some few members of his mother's family. The details of the murder seemed very real to him, but then, so did the details of Nora's vision to her.

"After all," thought he, as he took his seat at the table, "there can be nothing to brazen out. If Joe's alive here before my very eyes, how can he be lying at the bottom of that well?"

In one of Michael's subtle mind the first approach of hereditary insanity may possibly have been marked by this introspective glimpse of madness and hallucination as the only explanation of an actual event, which, as a matter of fact, was connected with neither one nor the other.

As lunch went on and the talk flowed freely,

he endeavoured to play the part of a man who was sufficiently recovered from his collapse to show at least a conventional interest in things, but he felt that affairs were all against him, that a dark Fate was fast closing in upon his life. What would the end be ?

CHAPTER XXXVIII

AFTER lunch Captain Brereton, wishing to have his first long talk with Joe, took him for a stroll round the park. He had many things to tell him, many things to ask him. After walking among the elms and lindens for some time, they came to a rustic seat beneath an old oak, where they sat down and lighted their cigars. Here Joe recounted to his father the story of the tragedy in Texas: how Jersey Craggs, actuated by motives which he had never fathomed, had meant to kill him, but had killed his cowboy instead; and how he had gone away without discovering his mistake. When he related the discovery of the pencilled message to Tomlinson, "Please receive two ranches," etc., Captain Brereton remarked upon it.

"Of course this man was his accomplice," he said. "I dare say your Jersey Craggs has

written that 'Please receive two ranches' a good many times. He sounds like a thorough-paced villain. But it was a near go for you, my boy; Providence must have been watching over you. How did you get to know the man?"

"Oh, the man got to know me," laughed Joe. "He came up to me in the inn-yard, and pretended that I was some other fellow. He called me by another name, and seemed so certain that I was some one else, a friend of his, that I had to show him this seal-mark on my arm; after which he gave in. Ha! ha! I thought at the time that he was actually mistaking me for some one else, but in the light of after events, I see that it was only his way of introducing himself. Oh yes, he bulldozed me at the time, he was so accurate and circumstantial. Ah! I remember now, not even the seal-mark would convince him. He said that it might have been made since he saw me last. Nothing would do but he must look at my left forearm for a Yankee sloop that his friend had tattooed there——"

Joe's words dropped off, and he seemed lost in thought. It was very strange that the

detective had spoken to him of a ship tattooed on his arm. The man who had a ship on his arm was the man who had scars on his thumbs and a jagged finger-nail; and he, according to Rachel, was the man who met her in New York and answered the letter stolen by Craggs. He was building the foundation of what he considered a wild theory on all this when Captain Brereton interrupted him.

"It was obviously his artful way of getting to know you well enough to stick a knife into you. You see, some men are so particular that they think it a breach of etiquette to murder you without an introduction of some kind. Hello! there's a carriage going up the drive. Two ladies. I wonder who they can be?"

Joe formed a very clear opinion as to who they might be, but he said nothing. It was not his business to prove his innocence and to dispel the vagaries of Mrs. Cope's mind. She would have to prove matters against him, and that would be difficult. But what about Nora? He knew Mrs. Cope's way of coming to the point without any apologetic preamble,

and he feared that in a few minutes' time Nora would hear a mixture of truth and error which would drive her half mad. He grew restless, and was relieved to hear Captain Brereton remark that they had better make their way slowly up to the house and see who it was that had come.

On arriving there, Joe said, "Don't you wait for me, dad. I'll just make myself a little more respectable before I face the ladies, whoever they may be."

Joe was hanging his hat up in the hall as he spoke. He watched his father go into the drawing-room, and then, taking down a clothes-brush, removed some of the morning's travel-dust from his clothes. Feeling that he must collect his thoughts before facing Rachel's formidable aunt, he took a turn up and down the hall. While he was engaged in this occupation, the drawing-room door opened, and Nora came out, her face as pale as death and her eyes blazing with indignation.

"What is the matter, Nora?" asked Joe, by way of opening the battle.

"You have deceived me!" she said in a low, tense voice. "I asked you if there was

another woman, and you said no. It appears there is another woman, and you have given her the right to bring her aunt here to remonstrate and ask for an explanation of your conduct. Oh, how could you dare to say what you said to me this morning?"

Joe frowned. "How dare you talk to me like that?" he said. "I have a right to say what is true, and no more. Do you wish to judge for yourself as to the truth of what these people say?"

"I think they have made it perfectly clear," she replied, turning away.

"You have made one mistake to-day, Nora," said Joe, quickly; "you have already insulted me once, and had to own that you were mistaken. Think twice before you do it again."

Nora wavered. "I will listen to what you have to say," she said.

"Then come in with me and listen."

Taking her by the hand, he led her into the drawing-room, and closed the door.

CHAPTER XXXIX

“**H**OW d'you do, Mrs. Cope?” Joe bowed stiffly. “Rachel, this is an unexpected pleasure.”

He smiled as he shook hands with Rachel. He felt he had no cause against her; moreover, he was perfectly certain now that he had never been really in love with her. Rachel blushed, and smiled sadly at him, and then darted a fierce glance at Nora, who returned it with interest. Mrs. Cope sat silent, as if she was aware that her very silence was enough for Joe, who, although he did not see how the affair was to end, was still perfectly self-possessed.

“Mother,” he said, “could you take Miss Cope into the garden and show her the flowers? I can speak more freely to her aunt if she is not here. No, you needn't go, dad; nor you either, Michael.”

"Yes, come, my dear," said Mrs. Brereton, rising with agility.

She felt friendly towards Rachel, because she had come between Joe and Nora—a matter over which she had already exchanged many significant glances with Michael.

When they had left the room, Joe turned to Mrs. Cope.

"I suppose you have denounced me in clear, forcible terms?" he said.

"I did not come here to denounce you," she replied, with her sharp tongue concealed behind a velvety smile. "I came here to ascertain whether or not you intend to marry my niece."

"And why should I marry her, pray?"

Mrs. Cope shrugged her shoulders. "If you are an honourable man, you should be able to answer that question yourself."

Michael grinned. Captain Brereton looked grave. Nora sat in her chair like a marble statue.

"Well," said Joe, in rising wrath, "as an honourable man, I swear that I have never made love to Rachel in any way. My conscience is perfectly clear on that point. I did

not meet her in New York, nor did I write to her."

"Is that your son's handwriting?" asked Mrs. Cope, passing Somers's pencil note to Captain Brereton.

"Yes; that is certainly my son's handwriting," said he, when he had adjusted his glasses, and glanced through it. "Did you write this, Joe?"

Joe took it, and read it through. "No," he said; "certainly not." Then, turning to Mrs. Cope, he asked, "When was this delivered?"

"About eight o'clock the night before last," she replied. "And, as you are aware, I kept the appointment instead of Rachel."

"Yes; and when you found I was not there, what did you do?"

"But you *were* there, and I spoke to you."

"I was not there!"

"You were. Surely I can believe my own senses."

"My dear Mrs. Cope, I can prove beyond all question that I left Lime Street for Euston by the eight-o'clock train."

"No; you were going by that train, but you sold your cycle to a friend at the station

just before the train started, and did not go. Then, about quarter-past ten, you went to the cycle-shop again, and bought another one, which you rode to the station, where you took the 10.30 for Euston."

Mrs. Cope looked triumphant as she concluded what she considered a most convincing proof of Joe's duplicity.

"I did no such thing!" said Joe, hotly. "At half-past ten I was about a hundred miles from Liverpool."

"I expected this," said Mrs. Cope, turning to Captain Brereton with a weary sigh of disgust. "It has been the same all the way through. What your son has said or done at one time he has contradicted at another. I met him on the landing-stage when I came off the *Campania*, and he said he had just wired Rachel's address to me in New York. Then I met him again in the evening, and he denied having seen me in the afternoon, and said that he had just ascertained Rachel's address. Now, when I see him again, he denies meeting me in the evening. Such foolish behaviour is ridiculous, absurd!"

"Is it possible," said Captain Brereton,

thoughtfully, "that it was some one else you met last night—some one whom you mistook for my son?"

At this, Michael, who had been listening with interest to what he regarded as the story of Joe's complete downfall, turned suddenly pale. His brain had been working quickly. Nora, now very alert, glanced up at Joe, who stood gazing at his father earnestly. But Mrs. Cope made a gesture of impatience.

"Impossible!" she said emphatically. "I have known your son for many years. I can swear to him when I see him. Besides——"

But at this moment there was a diversion. Mrs. Brereton rushed into the room in a state of excitement.

"John! John!" she cried. "The men have brought something up from the well. They would not show it me, and they insist on seeing you at once. There they are—look! in the garden."

All those in the room gathered round the window, and looked into the garden. On the lawn were two men, and on the ground beside them was something on a broad plank covered over with sacks.

"It looks like a man on the plank," said Captain Brereton. "Perhaps they've had an accident; and yet there were only two men at the well."

No one noticed Michael. He stood near a side window gibbering. He was gazing before him with eyes into which the sudden gleam of madness had leapt like a flame. With the last flickering light of reason he saw it all—Joe's innocence proved by the evidence of his own guilt.

"Let us cry 'pax' for awhile," said Joe. "Probably this is some poor man who is hurt, and we may be able to do something. Shall we go out and see?"

Mrs. Cope acquiesced in silence, and as they passed out, Nora followed them like one in a dream; while Michael, remaining behind unobserved, stood by the window, looking on at the scene upon the lawn.

Outside the house Joe went in advance, leaving Mrs. Cope and Nora following more slowly. Rachel presently joined them, and in a constrained silence they reached the little group gathered about the "something on the plank."

Joe, who had just preceded them, was saying—

“Well, my good fellows, why do you stare at me in that scared fashion? One would think I was a ghost risen from the grave.”

“That’s it, sir,” said one of the men, with his eyes riveted upon Joe’s face; “that’s just wot we *wos* thinkin’, sir. This ’ere corpus wot we’ve fished up out o’ the well, if it bain’t yourn, sir, me an’ my mate’d like to know who’s it be, with all doo respect to ye, sir.”

Mrs. Brereton, who was trying to urge Mrs. Cope and the two girls to come away from the presence of the dead body, missed this, but the others heard it, and, though they felt an instinctive horror of the “something on the plank,” they stood their ground, actuated each by the strongest curiosity, and, in Nora’s case, by something more.

“My good man, what *do* you mean?” asked Captain Brereton.

But before the question was well out of his mouth, Joe, with a swift stride, reached the side of the plank, and, withdrawing a part of the covering, exposed the upturned face of the dead man to view. No sooner had he done

so than he started back with a cry of amazement.

“My God! it is my face!”

Nora shrank back, covering her eyes with her hands, and shuddering. Rachel and her aunt looked from one to the other, and finally at Joe, as if they wondered what new piece of incomprehensible nonsense he was trying to foist upon them now. Mrs. Brereton stood aghast and bewildered, while the captain bent down over the corpse to verify the truth of Joe's assertion.

When he rose to his feet and turned towards them, his face told plainly that what Joe had said was perfectly true.

“Mark my words,” he said decisively, addressing Mrs. Cope, “this is the man whom you have been mistaking for my son. Look for yourself.”

Mrs. Cope drew near, and looked down at the face that might have been Joe's. But before she could utter her astonishment, Rachel rushed to the side of the body, where, kneeling down and throwing off the coverings, she found the dead man's hand. She glanced at the crooked little finger, then, turning it palm

upwards, she looked at the ball of the thumb. Like a mad thing she seized the other one, and did the same. Then she gave a low moan of mortal agony that was heartrending to hear, and, throwing up her arms, fell forward across the body of her lover, and lay still.

At this moment Michael, who, with a passing reaction towards sanity, had been watching through the window of the drawing-room, and had seen enough to make him doubt what little reason had returned him, now rushed blindly out from the other side of the house, and fled in the direction of the copse whence the men had brought their ghastly burden.

CHAPTER XL

“**P**OOOR girl!” said Captain Brereton to Joe that evening, as they were sitting in the library; “the doctor says that if she had lived she would have been either incurably insane or a hopeless paralytic. It must have been a frightful shock to the girl to discover at one and the same moment that by this mysterious deception she had loved one man and given herself to another; that the man she loved was suddenly cut off from her, and the man who was rightfully hers was the one that lay dead before her eyes.”

“Terrible!” said Joe, shuddering at the memory of Rachel’s sudden death. Then, after a long pause, he resumed, “It’s a very strange business, the whole affair; and we’ve not got to the bottom of it yet by a long way.”

“That’s true. Who was this man? What

was his real name? and where did he come from?"

"I have a very strange theory," said Joe. "You remember I showed you the ship tattooed on the dead man's arm?"

"Yes; but how does that help us?"

"Why, don't you remember?—the man that Jersey Craggs mistook me for in Texas had a Yankee sloop on his arm."

Captain Brereton raised his eyebrows. "You mean that this man was aware of his likeness to you, and took advantage of it to impersonate you?"

"I mean more than that," said Joe, significantly.

He was about to proceed when the door opened, and Peters the butler informed Captain Brereton that Dr. Cantrell had called, and wished to see him.

"Ah!" said the captain, turning to Joe, "I asked him to let me know the result of the *post-mortem*. Perhaps he will be able to throw some light on what we were just saying. Bring him in here, Peters, will you?" he concluded, addressing the butler.

In a few moments Dr. Cantrell, a tall, spare,

thoughtful-looking man with penetrating grey eyes, was shown in.

After exchanging a few words with the captain his glance fell on Joe.

"I do not require to be told," he said, "that I have the pleasure of meeting Mr. Joseph Brereton, late of Texas."

"You notice the likeness?" said the captain.

"Yes; I have just come from the *post-mortem*. No one could fail to notice it. And as there is every proof—or, I might say, appearance of proof—upon the murdered man that he is Joseph Brereton, late of Texas, it may be necessary for your son to prove his identity beyond question. Otherwise there is a great danger of his being accused, not only of being an impostor, but of his being the murderer of this man."

Joe laughed. "There is not much danger of that," he said. "Yet, after all, seeing that the people who know me perfectly well mistook this other man for me, and me for him, it is quite within reason that I should be asked to prove my identity beyond all question."

"Certainly," said the captain, who saw no

difficulty; "and especially as the man was not only the image of you, but seemed to know all your business."

"Very well," said Joe; "I can easily prove my identity. Now, dad, can you think of some mark by which you can swear to me as your son?"

"Several," said the captain. "There is that impress of the seal upon your left arm, which you certainly had before you left home. Marks you have acquired since would naturally be ruled out of court."

"Have you the mark of a seal upon your arm?" asked Dr. Cantrell, quickly, addressing Joe.

"I have. Here it is."

Joe bared his arm, and showed the impress of the seal.

"H'm!" said the doctor. "Your double has that same mark in the same place."

Captain Brereton knit his brows. "Impossible!" he gasped.

"It is true, however. Have you the seal itself?"

"No," said Joe; "Michael has it."

"My son also has the mark of a gash on

his thigh," said the captain, paying no heed to Joe's words.

"And the other has the same."

The captain stared. "It is almost beyond belief," he said.

"Has your son any other distinguishing sign?" asked the doctor.

"Yes. About two years ago my son wrote me that he had had an operation performed on his lower jaw, and the two molars which were removed were replaced by two on a gold plate. Have you those two now, Joe?"

"I have," said Joe.

Both turned towards Dr. Cantrell, who remarked quietly—

"And so has the other man."

Captain Brereton rose from his seat, and began pacing up and down the room, while the doctor remained looking fixedly at Joe, who, with the corners of his mouth drawn tight and his brows let down, was immersed in thought.

"There is some mystery here, which is not so easily settled," said the doctor. "You see, taking it for granted that you are the real Joe Brereton, how can you prove it? You are at a disadvantage, for upon the body of the

deceased was found evidence by which no coroner's jury would find any difficulty in identifying him—several letters addressed to him in Texas, a gold watch and chain bearing a monogram 'J. B.,' and an inscription showing that it was given him by his father on his twenty-first birthday."

On hearing this, Captain Brereton looked sharply at Joe, as if the thought had come to him that he was not his son at all, but some clever impostor, who had faked himself up in all points to represent his son.

"Look here," said Joe, excitedly. "Listen to me, and see what you can make of it. A man in Texas made my acquaintance by mistaking me for another man, and in doing so he let drop by accident that the only differences between that other and myself were that he had a front tooth gone whereas I hadn't, and that he had a Yankee sloop tattooed on his arm. I saw a great deal of this man, and we became friendly. Several weeks passed by, and then one night, under circumstances which showed plainly that his object was to kill me, he stabbed my man by mistake in my bed in the dark. I had very good proof that when he

fled the country he was under the impression that I was lying dead by his hand. Now, the point of my story is this : in the morning I found that there were various articles missing from my clothes which I had left in my room—my watch and chain, all the papers and letters from my pocket, my belt with my initials stamped on it, an old pocket-knife, and a gold and amber cigarette-holder. All these were missing, and I make a shrewd guess that all these articles were found upon deceased.”

“They were,” said the doctor, quietly. “I see your idea perfectly. You would say that the man who thought he had stabbed you went to the man for whom he had mistaken you, and faked him up in all points to represent you, and that this man, of course, is the deceased, from the fact of his having a Yankee sloop on his arm.”

“That is precisely my theory,” said Joe, almost smiling at the man’s sagacity.

But his face fell beyond all smiling as the legally minded medicine man continued—

“Well and good ; but the tale does not prove anything. Remember, I speak impartially, as an onlooker and a friend of

Captain Brereton's. If you are the real Joseph Brereton, or if you are the counterfeit, what you have told us signifies nothing, as a little thought will soon show you. It was only necessary for the counterfeit to know that the real man possessed these articles in order to be able to say that he, the real man, was the counterfeit, and stole them. You see, it is a case in which the impostor could tell the same story as the genuine person, with some few trifling alterations. The Yankee sloop, for instance, which you say was on the impostor's arm, might in reality have been upon the real Joseph Brereton's arm, executed quite lately."

Both Joe and Captain Brereton saw the force of the doctor's argument. The captain then began to see further.

"There is a master-mind behind all this," he said; "that is evident. This has not been done in a stupid, bungling fashion. The man who could take stock of such details as the mark of a wound on the thigh and two back teeth on a gold plate, would have taken good care to acquaint himself even with my son's history, right down to the little odds and ends stored in his memory."

"And therefore," interposed the doctor, "you would say that it is useless your trying to swear to your son's identity by anything he might remember of his early youth. You are quite right. You could prove nothing that way."

"Precisely," said Captain Brereton.

"Confound it all!" said Joe, starting up, "I shall begin to doubt my own identity in a minute. D'you mean to say that an impostor could know things that I've got stowed away in the corners of my memory? Look here! I can take you to a certain tree in the park where Nora and I carved our names seven or eight years ago. Does that convince you? I can point out——"

"It is no use," interrupted the doctor. "Any number of these things the clever impostor may have gleaned from the real man, or by careful observation since his arrival here. Mind, I'm not saying you are the impostor; but until you can prove negatively the identity of the deceased by proving positively your own, you must admit that you may become an object of suspicion."

"Yes, yes," said Joe, more calmly. "I

will try to think of some way. Nora may be able to help me. Can we have her in, dad?"

"By all means," said the captain; and he left the room to fetch her.

CHAPTER XLI

IN a few minutes Captain Brereton returned, followed by Nora, who, having closed the door, stood regarding the three men with a smile.

"What do you want me for, Joe?" she asked, holding one arm behind her, evidently to conceal something she had in her hand.

"Are you sure that I am Joe?" he said.

Nora gave a rippling laugh, not unmixed with disdain. Joe then told her the substance of the conversation that had been taking place, and concluded with—

"Now, can you identify me in any way that would leave no possible doubt on the matter?"

"Yes."

"How?"

The monosyllabic question came from the three men simultaneously.

"By the exercise of a little woman's wit."

"Which 'knocks lightning through you ere you know you're hit,'" quoted the captain, brightening up at the prospect. "Proceed, my girl."

"Let me see your thumbs, Joe," she said. "Look, Dr. Cantrell," she went on, as Joe held his thumbs out for inspection; "there are no scars upon them as there are upon the thumbs of the deceased."

"Yes, that proves that they are two different men, certainly," said the doctor, smiling; "but we know that already when we know that one is alive and the other dead."

"Yes; but I know more than that," replied Nora, confidently. "That the impostor has been deliberately faked, you have admitted. Now, do you suppose that the tale that the deceased told to Rachel, and which her aunt repeated to us, was true? I mean the tale of the medicine man searing his thumbs to keep away the evil spirits. No such thing. The deceased—the impostor—had his thumbs seared to guard against the remote possibility of there being any existing thumb impressions made by the real Joe Brereton. The impostor, thinking Joe Brereton out of the way, made

sure by this artifice that his thumb-marks, which he could not fake, would never by the remotest chance betray him."

"H'm! The impostor might have had Joe Brereton's thumbs branded in that fever, to give him a complexion of imposture according to the view you have just taken."

The doctor had one of those subtle minds that are only kept from perpetrating a really clever swindle by their subtler consciences.

"Yes; if he were sure there were no thumb-marks of the real man in existence," said Nora. "It was just because he had guessed or gathered that there were some such marks that he had his own thumbs seared."

"Where are the marks you speak of?" asked Captain Brereton.

"Here!" said Nora, producing the copy-book which she had been holding behind her. "As soon as I saw those branded thumbs, I guessed the reason of them, and have been in the lumber-room looking for this ever since. Joe's, Michael's, and mine—all our thumb-marks are here. Now, Joe, dip your thumb in the ink and make your mark."

Joe did so, and Nora passed it round. There

was no denying it—the two impressions corresponded exactly.

“Ha! I knew you were my Joe,” said Captain Brereton, clapping him on the back.

“I congratulate you, captain, on the return of your son,” said Dr. Cantrell, extending his hand.

“But if it had not been for a woman’s wit,” said Joe, taking Nora’s hand in his, “I might never have known whether I was a dead impostor or a living genuine article. Congratulate me, both of you, on that fact, and”—looking lovingly at Nora—“and on this.”

They were not slow in their congratulations, and Joe led Nora away to tell her how happy he was.

Dr. Cantrell, remaining behind with the captain, appeared to have still something more to say.

“We have cleared up one mystery,” he remarked, when the captain had sunk, with a sigh of relief, into a chair; “but more remains behind. The man who was found in the well was murdered, not drowned. He was shot. Now, the question is, by whom?”

"Have you any idea?"

"I have a clue. What do you think we found in the murdered man's lungs?"

"What did you find?" asked Captain Brereton, leaning forward.

"A charge of shot. And in his heart?"

Captain Brereton leaned further forward, and asked, in a voice of suspense—

"Yes. What did you find in his heart?"

"A seal; apparently the very seal whose impress is burnt on your son's arm."

Captain Brereton sank back in his chair as pale as death.

"Does that afford any clue?" he asked, controlling his features with a great effort.

"Your son said that Michael had that seal."

"Yes, he had; and I dare say he's got it still, but it's my firm opinion Michael has run away. He always said he would if Joe came back. But it need not necessarily be that seal which you have found. The existence of an impression on the arm of the deceased points to the fact that a counterfeit seal existed, and it is possibly this counterfeit which you found in the dead man's heart."

The doctor looked at the captain narrowly. Then he said—

“That would seem to point to suicide. The deceased slipped the counterfeit seal into the gun on top of the shot to make doubly sure.”

“Exactly,” said the captain, regaining his composure.

“Yes, for the time being that seems to me the most reasonable explanation. Mysterious affair altogether. Well, I must be going, my dear Brereton. I’m heartily glad, for your sake, that we’ve cleared the mystery up satisfactorily.”

When the doctor had taken his leave, and was walking down the drive, he mused as he went.

“H’m! Seeing that that double charge must have been fired at a range of at least five yards, the thing was certainly not suicide. Michael was so eager to get rid of the man he imagined was his brother, that he made the mistake of slipping that tell-tale seal into his gun. Poor old Brereton! It is a pity that this part of the affair can’t be hushed up for his sake. There’s no fear of Michael ever returning, and another construction might be

put upon his flight, yet there's too much mystery here to avoid an exhaustive inquiry."

Captain Brereton, for his part, went in search of Joe. Having found him with Nora on the garden-seat beneath the cedar by the side of the lawn, he said—

"I'm sorry to disturb you in this way, my son, but there is something I must speak to you about at once."

"I'll come into the library with you, then," said Joe.

"And I'll wait here till you come back," added Nora.

CHAPTER XLII

WHEN they reached the library, the captain, with a grave, set face, paced nervously to and fro before speaking. Joe could see that there was something terrible in his mind.

"What is it, dad?" he asked anxiously.

"You remember that story I told you about the seal," said the captain: "how Mrs. Armstrong dropped it into Michael's gun without the knowledge of any other person, and how Nora located it—clairvoyantly, we thought, but really by thought-reading—at the bottom of the well?"

"Yes," said Joe, "I remember. Has the seal been found?"

"It was found at the *post-mortem*," said his father, in a hollow voice, coming to a standstill by Joe's chair—"found in the body of the murdered man along with a charge of

shot that must have been fired at very close quarters."

"Michael's gun! What, dad? You don't mean that——"

"I do," said Captain Brereton, solemnly. "The seal was in Michael's gun, and he did not know it. The gun had been left loaded, and the seal must have stuck in the end of the cartridge. He took his gun to shoot rabbits the other morning, and the only shot he fired was down in the copse, at a rabbit, he told me, which he missed."

"The shot and the seal must have hit the man by accident," said Joe, quickly.

"Wait, my boy," said his father, sternly. "As soon as I showed Michael Mrs. Armstrong's telegram saying that she had dropped the seal into his gun, Nora had an impression of the well, and said she saw the seal imbedded in flesh down in the darkness. Now, why did she see this the moment Michael learned the seal had been in his gun? Simply because she is a thought-reader and not a clairvoyant—the very point Michael was bent on proving—and she read the position of the seal from his mind as soon as he knew it

himself. Besides, there is no blinking facts. That man was so much like you that even I could not have told the difference. Couple the fact of the extraordinary likeness with the fact that Michael knew very well that, if you did not return, your death would be accounted for by the wreck of the *Lagos*, and my will would be re-made in his favour—couple the one thing with the other, and both with the further fact that Michael has suddenly disappeared, and you can easily form your own conclusions.”

“Poor old dad!” said Joe, rising and placing his hand on his father’s shoulder; “this is terrible for you.”

“Yes, my boy, if the thing comes out, and a son of mine is branded as a murderer, it will nearly kill me.”

Joe thought a moment. “It must come out,” he said, “if I know anything about inquests and cross-examinations. A thing with a mystery in it like this is bound to be sifted to the bottom.”

“I’m afraid so,” replied his father, shaking his head sadly. Then, laying his hand on Joe’s shoulder, he added, “Go back to Nora, my lad, and prepare her for what she will certainly

hear to-morrow. I have a more difficult task—to break this terrible news to Michael's mother."

He left the room with bowed head and feeble step; and Joe, full of a clear thought which he had not expressed, found his way back to the seat beneath the cedar where Nora was still sitting.

"My girl," he said, sitting beside her, and taking her hand in his, "how would you feel towards another girl who had saved my life?"

"I should kiss her to start with," said Nora, impulsively; "and then—well, then I suppose I should begin to be a little jealous of her."

"Yes, Nora; if she were living you would be jealous, but what if she were dead?"

"Joe"—Nora seized his arm with trembling hands—"do you mean Rachel? Did she save your life?"

"Yes, by her strong love."

"By her strong love? I am not jealous now. Tell me how it happened."

Then Joe told her how he had left Liverpool that night intending to reach Sefton Hall by

bicycle early in the morning, and how he had been turned back by the warning voice of Rachel. He told her how the carriage-door had opened, and Rachel's lips had been pressed to his in a warm kiss.

At this Nora started and trembled a moment, but, drawing closer to him, she said—

“Oh, Joe, she must have loved you deeply for her spirit to come to you like that! But I don't understand; you said she saved your life.”

“Yes; that is the terrible part of the story. The words, ‘You are going to your death and mine,’ are now clear to me. If I had continued my journey to Euston that night, and on arriving there, had ridden down here on my bicycle as I had intended doing, I must without a doubt have arrived several hours earlier than my double, in which case I should have wandered about the park till sunrise. Now, I should either have met my double or Michael. If the former, he would have given up the game and left the field to me, in which case I should have been now in his place; and if the latter, I should still have been murdered——”

"Murdered! Who would have murdered you?"

"My double was shot because he was mistaken for me," replied Joe, trying to unfold it gradually. "You can guess who shot him when I tell you that at the *post-mortem* they found a charge of rabbit-shot and a seal."

"Ach!" said Nora, with a shudder, "the seal was dropped into Michael's gun, and when he went out that morning he did not know it. And if you had not turned back it might very easily have been you that would have been killed. And it was Rachel made you turn back. Come with me."

She seized him by the hand, and, without speaking again, hurried him to the house, and upstairs to the room where Mrs. Cope sat with her dead. The bereaved and heart-broken lady looked up as the two entered softly, but she did not speak.

Nora led Joe to the side of the bed whereon the body of Rachel lay. Together they gazed down upon the still beauty of the girl who had threatened to come between them. The white solemnity of death and the last prayer or Rachel's hands crossed upon her breast did

not come between Nora and her impulse. With her eyes full of tears and her heart full of grateful love, she bent down and kissed the cold white brow tenderly.

Then, this tribute of gratitude paid to the dead, they went out as silently as they had come in.

* * * * *

At the inquest next day Detective John William Bale was very much present. From the very beginning of the proceedings it was evident that he had settled in his mind that the dead man was Joe Brereton, and the living, an atrociously clever swindler and impostor. He maintained that he had traced the murdered man back to the time he left Texas, and the living impostor to the time he started from Denver. Beginning on this foundation, he mixed up their doings in New York and Liverpool to an alarming extent. He knew all about the love passages, the gallant rescue of Rachel, the buying of the bicycles, and Joe's sudden return to Liverpool—in fact, he knew everything except the true explanation of the seared thumbs ; and when Nora gave evidence as to Joe's identity, and proved it from the

thumb-marks in the old copy-book, John William Bale wilted and went away. When he came to a quiet place, he drew a warrant for the arrest of one Frank Somers out of his pocket, and, setting a match to it, lighted a large cigar at the flame, and then watched the paper burn to ashes.

"Confound Monsieur Bertillon and his cussed anthropometry!" he said. "If it hadn't been for that little point, I guess I could have made a bit of a fuss, even if I couldn't have brought the darned thing right home. Whew! what a slap-up nine days' mystery simply ruined by a thumb-mark."

Meanwhile the whole history of the seal and its hiding-place was brought out at the inquest, and this, coupled with Michael's attitude towards his brother, and with the fact of his sudden disappearance, pointed plainly to him as the murderer.

A warrant was issued for his arrest, but it may be stated here that he was never found, and consequently the family were spared any further grief than they had already sustained from the knowledge of his guilt. Thinking that he was now making for the ends of the earth,

never to return, those most concerned strove to forget his memory. It was not until three years afterwards, when a skeleton was found at the bottom of the well, which was being deepened for regular use, that the nature of his end was correctly guessed.

CHAPTER XLIII

ONE evening, some weeks after the events narrated in the preceding chapter, Joe was sitting alone in the library after Nora and the old people had retired to bed, when Peters came, and said that a stranger wished to speak to him privately.

"It's rather late, Peters," said Joe, looking up over his paper. "Who is he, and what does he want?"

"He won't give no name, sir; but he says he's got important business, and will not go away without seeing you."

Joe paused a moment, and then said, "Show him in, Peters. It's some one in trouble, perhaps."

Peters retired, and Joe, rising from his chair, walked to a writing-case at the other end of the room, opened a small drawer, and

drew forth a revolver, which he placed in his coat pocket.

"One never knows," he said quietly—"a man who refuses to give his name might mean mischief. Besides, maybe it's some one who is quite capable of sticking a knife into me."

As he remained standing with his eyes on the door, Peters ushered in the stranger—a tall, spare man with twinkling grey eyes, and so heavily bearded that his features were almost hidden. When Peters had left the room, the stranger looked round quickly to see that the door was closed, then hurriedly stripped his face of a false beard, and stood smiling benignly at Joe.

"Jersey Craggs!" cried Joe, with a start, for the first appearance of the visitor had almost persuaded him it was some one else.

"Right you are, Frank, my boy," said Craggs, stroking his goatee; "I'm glad to see you're not above recognizing me now you've got a Yankee start in the world. Good business, my boy; straight wire! Straight wire!" And he winked knowingly as he took a seat without waiting to be invited, and reposed his ungainly feet upon the table. "By the way, Frank," he

added, "I suppose I must address you as Mr. Joseph Brereton hereabouts—eh? Ha, ha, ha! Talk about a swindle. Why, it flogs the giddy playwright all to fits."

On hearing himself addressed as Frank, Joe's thoughts flew back to his first meeting with Jersey Craggs, when he, Joe, had been mistaken for one Frank Somers. Then his memory traversed the incidents of their three weeks' companionship in Texas, and what before had been a hazy grasp of the facts was now perfectly clear. He recalled how Craggs had led him on to tell his family history, how he had made him talk for hours at a stretch, listening the while with such polite attention that the smallest and most inconsequent detail seemed to have an absorbing interest for him. There was no doubt in his mind now as to his motive in all this, and there was no longer any need to wonder why Craggs had attempted to put him out of the way. The whole mystery, half solved before, became now as clear as day before Craggs had finished speaking.

"If I remember right, Craggs," he said, "this is the second time you have mistaken me for Frank Somers."

Craggs curled up one corner of his clean-shaven mouth until one eye would have been forced into a wink had not the eyebrows been raised high with astonishment.

"Well, I'm darned!" he said, a little disconcerted by Joe's remark; for, though he was certain in his mind that Joe Brereton was dead by his hand, how could he say so? How could he prove now that this was not Joe Brereton? "Well, I'm darned!" he repeated slowly. "To think that a cuss like yew would play it low down on an old pal like me. But it won't do, Frank Somers; maybe yew know the game yew're playing at—I'm darned if I do. This is a partnership, this is; and we agreed to share and share alike. Now, I arsk yew, who was it studied up Joe Brereton and got him off by heart from his all-fired mixed-up family history and doin's down to the hall-mark on his arm? Who was it made a pynt of ascertaining the full details of that same Joe's untimely death, and then scooted for Denver to fake yew up and sot yew on the track right there? Who was it, anyhow, that polished Frank Somers up in every blessed detail from the little tricks o' speech

right down to brandin' that gash on your thigh and givin' you a new tooth in front, so as yew could play Joe Brereton right up? Who was it got his writing at his finger-tips and taught it to you? Who was it got yew away from that gal in New York all unbeknown to yourself? Who was it, I say? Look here, Som, old man, yew know who it was—no one but Jersey Craggs, late of Cincinnatta. And now that I've fixed the hull concern up and set it humming, you think that you're going to play it off on me that you're the real Joe Brereton. Waal, there! What in thunder is life worth livin' for when yew, my own familiar friend, can turn and bite the hand that faked you? But, gracious goodness, it's clean out o' sight! If I didn't happen to know better'n most that Joe Brereton's a deader, I might be bulldozed; but as it is, Franky, I ain't—and that's what! Cock your eye over that. That's your writing and your signature, I guess—leastways, I reckon you won't bust the show by disputing it."

He handed Joe a slip of paper—the promise to pay which he had insisted upon in his agreement with Frank Somers.

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"Yes, this is my handwriting," said Joe; "but it's worth nothing, as you have already admitted that you have my handwriting at your finger-tips."

"Yes; but, in the first place, you can't prove this is a forgery without busting the show; and, in the second, it ain't likely that Joey Brereton is goin' to rise from his grave for a little matter like this."

"First of all, are you quite sure that Joe Brereton's dead?"

"As sure as I am that I see Frank Somers before me right now."

"Think again. Did you take the pillow from his face after you had pinned him down with the knife that night? Did you make sure that it was Joe Brereton you had jabbed, and not some one else?"

Jersey Craggs's face grew a trifle pale as he stared at Joe. He took his feet from the table and sat up, his hands resting on the arms of his chair. But he was always ready for a piece of subtlety such as he imagined this to be.

"Frank," he said, with a nasty expression, "stash all this jaw about pillows and jabbing

with a knife; it makes me real tired. Let's come to business, I say."

"That's what I'm trying to do. You remember when you put your head in at the door of my room that night, and went down to the stable to see to your horse—well, I'll tell you what happened while you were away. I suddenly remembered that when I had spent the night at your house a week before, your snoring kept me awake, so I asked my man Tomlinson to sleep in my bed while I took his, and the exchange was effected before you came back, so as not to hurt your feelings."

Jersey Craggs's jaw fell, but only to rise again.

"Som, old man, what a rippin', spiffin', top-side romancer you'd make. I'm darned if it ain't quite pretty to hear you. Go on, Franky; go on—I'm listenin'. What else have you pumped out of Tomlinson?"

Joe continued. "A few weeks ago your Frank Somers arrived here to take possession, but was mistaken for me, and shot by some one who, like you, wished to get me out of the way. His body could still be exhumed and identified if necessary. He had a Yankee

sloop on his forearm—I haven't. Look here"—Joe bared his arm, and held it for Craggs to inspect—"you can't rub out a tattoo without leaving some trace, you know."

"No; but you can have it grafted," said Craggs, inspecting the arm for some joining of the skin.

"That arm is just as Nature made it," insisted Joe; "so's the other. So are these thumbs. Look!" He held up his thumbs to Craggs as he continued, "The murdered man had seared scars on his. You see mine are untouched."

Craggs inspected them, and satisfied himself that there was no skin-grafting in this case either.

"Wal, I guess that's a fair euchre," he said at last, with a meditative drawl. "The game we played that night was prophetic. It's mighty true what a small element of chance will upset a large amount of skill."

Jersey Craggs, who still kept his seat, seemed disposed to moralize on the situation, but all the time he kept a quick eye on Joe.

"You'll excuse my mentioning it, Joey, my lad," he went on, "but I guess the shot that

brought Somers down was meant for you, maybe."

"Precisely."

"And if some kind Providence hadn't toted Somers along here to take your place, yew would now be in *his* place—ain't that so?"

"It is," said Joe.

"Wal, then, who sent Somers here? Answer me that. Who rigged up a man at great expense, and sent him over here to die in your place? Mind, I'm not saying but what I started in as your chief mourner, and that you owe your life to Providence; but what I want ter sot before you is this—who supplied that kind Providence with the materials to work with? Joey, you caan't deny that Jersey Craggs, late of Cincinnatta, was the man selected by a lovin' Providence to save you from a norful death."

Had Craggs shown the slightest fear, it is probable that Joe would have despised him and his argument. But he was as devoid of fear as he was of remorse or of conscience. He sat there, as of old, with his fingers thrust in his perpendicular pocket, and his free hand assisting in the argument; and as Joe looked

at this extraordinary man, he could not help feeling, in spite of himself, some admiration for his daring and coolness.

"Wal," said Craggs, rising from his seat and speaking as if he was still, as always, the master of the situation, "I must be going, and I reckon I'll have to leave it to you which way I go—through the door or through the ceiling, perhaps I should say, through the floor." He produced a huge pocket-knife from his vest, and opened a long, straight blade. Holding this in his right hand, and feeling with his left for the opening between the ribs above his heart, he concluded, "Now, Joey, me lad, I'll give you jest one minute to make up your mind. Yew can either direct me to the police-station so's I can give meself up for puncturing Tomlinson, or else yew can sot the police on the track of my immortal sperrit—if I've got one."

"Put down that knife," said Joe, producing his revolver and levelling it.

"Wal, that's a darn-fool trick," said Craggs, coolly. "But jest as yew like. Ef you don't think I can let me own soul out of me own

carcase, do it yerself. Blaze away ; I'm ready. I ain't got no prayers to say."

Joe lowered his revolver. "Craggs," he said, "it is true that in a very strange way I owe you my life, for had it not been for your sending Somers to take my place, I should undoubtedly have been killed by my brother, sooner or later. In consideration of this, then, I would advise you to put that knife away. The police-station is about half a mile down the main road on the right—any one in the village will direct you."

Craggs closed the pocket-knife with a snap, and put it away.

"Wal, I congratulate yew on having saved a good carpet. And, look here, Joey, old hoss, if ever you get mixed up in my concerns again, I'll weed you out right there, and sot you in a safe place, because you've let me keep me soul in me carcase, and go on me all-fired way rejoicin'. So long, old un ; maybe I'll pay you back some day."

He passed out. Jersey Craggs, late of Cincinnati, fully intended to give himself up—but not until the Judgment Day.

CONCLUSION

THUS it happened that the marriage of Joe with Nora some month or six weeks later was not marred by any revival of the mystery which surrounded the murder of Joe's double. On the other hand, it was a day of general rejoicing throughout the whole of Wilminghurst, and the news which rapidly circulated in the district to the effect that Nora's principal wedding present was a fortune of thirty thousand pounds, was received with general acclamation, for no one was a greater favourite than the future mistress of Sefton Hall. When the sealed packet, left by Nora's father in Captain Brereton's care, was opened—as every one supposed for the first time—and its secret, which none but Michael had known, was revealed, it was the happiest moment of a happy day. But later, when the pair were speeding

away in the gloaming, Joe reminded Nora of it, and asked—

“ Does that make you feel happier, Nora ? ”

“ It could not,” she replied. “ Does it make me any dearer to you, Joe ? ”

“ It could not,” returned he, gazing tenderly into her lovely eyes. “ You have always been the dearest thing in the world to me.”

And in the love that drew her lips to his, the wedding gift of thirty thousand pounds was forgotten. Yet, in after years, the poorer people of Wilminghurst, whom Nora loved, were none the worse for it.

THE END

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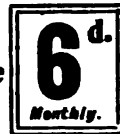
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